

SIMMONS COLLEGE COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS

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PART ONE: MY LIFE AND WORK

It is such an honour and a privilege to be able to talk to you, and I am delighted to be delivering the Simmons College commencement address this year. I would like to speak to you today about the experiences that have shaped my life.

You must be very proud to be graduating from such a distinguished school. Simmons College, as you will know, was set up 1899 to educate women, in order that they could have an independent livelihood. This vision is something very close to my own heart: I have been campaigning for womens' and childrens' rights for some 25 years.

I would like to thank the men, women and children who have inspired and motivated me to continue campaigning for human rights, peace and social justice, and my esteemed colleagues at Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Human Rights First, Mercy Corp, Médecins sans Frontières, Physicians for Human Rights and the Centre for Constitutional Rights. I am grateful to these organisations for their support over the last few decades, and for their assistance in the research of this speech.

I would also like to thank William F. Schulz, former executive director of Amnesty International USA. He is widely known as the man who has done more than anyone in the American human rights movement to make human rights issues known in the United States. Personally, he has been a mentor to me. He taught me the meaning of courage and integrity, and encouraged me to stand by my moral convictions. Along with my mother, he was in large part responsible for my decision to become a human rights campaigner. Thank you, Bill.

My mother

I am standing here today in large part thanks to my mother, who was my inspiration, and my role model. It was my mother who impressed upon me the value and importance of a good education, and who prompted me to successfully apply for a scholarship to study in Paris. My mother was a firm believer that education was the best legacy a parent could give a child. She was right: each of you should be proud of your accomplishments today. Your education is a great gift and powerful tool.

You have been studying in a beautiful, green city. I'm sure many of you will be sorry to leave it behind. My mother first opened my eyes to the beauty and wonder of the natural world, a world I have campaigned to protect ever since. My mother's devotion to and love for nature were contagious. She taught me to treasure the beautiful rainforest in my native Nicaragua, to cherish

orchids and wild flowers, and to love all the flora and fauna that surrounded us. We used to take long walks in the rainforest, during which she would teach me the names of orchids and trees. My mother was surrounded by flowers until the end of her days.

My mother was a pioneer. She believed in women's emancipation at a time when most women solely devoted themselves to home-making and were regarded as second-class citizens. She was also concerned about the principles of democracy, the rule of law and social and economic justice. As a child and adolescent, I remember her outspoken opposition to the Somoza dictatorship in Nicaragua. She was and will continue to be my inspiration, my greatest gift; I devoted my life to defending women and children's rights as a tribute to her.

Once my mother became a divorced, working woman, she suffered discrimination at the hands of Nicaragua's conservative society of that era. I shall never forget the impact my parents' divorce had on me. Overnight, my well-to-do, privileged life was turned upside down. My mother had to take care of her family pretty much on her own. Life was not easy for a working and divorced woman who had to support three children in the Nicaragua of the sixties. It was at that time I first learned the meaning of discrimination.

I became determined to make a difference, and to become an instrument of change in the world. I was determined to seek an education that would protect me from enduring my mother's fate: I refused to be regarded as a second-class citizen because of my gender. I never wanted to feel powerless again in the face of discrimination, hardship, or atrocities committed by powerful oppressors.

This battle has not yet been won. As far as I have come in my professional life, I still experience prejudice on account of my gender. Each of you will need to be vigilant against it in your lives. You should never accept being treated differently because you are women. Nor should you think that in order to be successful, you need to act like a man. You can be a force of change, and you can achieve a position of influence, without becoming a caricature of a man. You can remain feminine and still succeed. But in order to do so, you must not accept the double standards that exist even today.

As a teenager, I had felt powerless when I learned of the student massacres by Somoza's National Guard. All I could do was participate in demonstrations against my government's brutality. But with the strength and determination my mother gave me, I left Nicaragua for Paris armed with a scholarship to study political science.

I arrived in Paris on the 14th of July, Bastille Day. How appropriate for a young idealist! In the land I had come from, "liberty" and "equality" were concepts one could only dream about. But in France I discovered their value, and the weight of their meaning. Freedom and democracy, the rule of law, judicial review, and respect for human rights: for me Europe seemed an enlightened paradise.

In 1971, I entered my well-known marriage – a marriage that was to change my life radically. In fact, I could have spoken to you at length about my marriage in the context of justice and revenge. But I somehow felt that there were more important issues to address.

My marriage brought an enormous amount of media attention. Overnight, I found myself under the glare of the world media. It was a bewildering experience. I was no longer a person in my own right, able to articulate my own thoughts, embrace my own convictions and live my own life.

So, ironically, whilst I had left Nicaragua to escape its narrow perception of women, I was now facing a similar prejudice in the enlightened world. It was not easy to reconcile my new status with my political beliefs. Ultimately, this was a sobering experience, which heightened my political consciousness. I had to fight for my rights and my identity. I had to learn how to transform my public image into a force for justice and change.

Work in Latin America

During my work throughout Latin America, I have met countless mothers, fathers, daughters and sons, who were desperately looking for their “disappeared” and clamouring for the culprits to be brought to justice. Their cries for justice have mostly gone unheard. Many of the “disappeared” were executed by US-sponsored governments or death squads.

It has been a long and arduous learning process: I have visited war zones and refugee camps. I have denounced massacres and human rights violations. I have testified to the US Congress. I have had to learn how to focus public attention to human rights issues. I have had to learn the complex political system of the United States, in order to fight injustice and abuse in Latin America.

In the early twentieth century, Nicaragua suffered invasions and protracted occupations by US forces. In 1932, the US helped General Anastasio Somoza seized power. His military regime guaranteed an “open door policy” to the United States’ business interests. The Somoza oligarchy ruled the country until 1979, allowing the pillage of the country’s natural resources by US corporations. Under the thumb of the Somoza family, Nicaragua suffered what J. F. Kennedy described as “the harshest common enemies of man: tyranny, poverty, disease and war”, and the country had one of the highest rates of infant mortality in the Americas. When I was born it had only three million inhabitants: two-thirds of Boston’s current population. Growing up in Nicaragua first taught me the meaning of social and economic injustice.

My divorce coincided with the fall of Somoza. A popular uprising led by the Sandinistas finally succeeded in ousting the tyrant and his cronies. They seized power in 1979. Only later was I to appreciate the political significance of this event: a “third world” country was daring to break from the subservient development model.

In 1981, my life changed forever. I was in Honduras, visiting La Virtud, a Salvadorian refugee camp on a US Congressional fact-finding mission. During my visit, an armed death squad of about thirty-five men marched across the border from El Salvador, rounded up about forty of the refugees and proceeded to take them back to El Salvador, with the Honduran army’s blessing.

This was a time when the Salvadorian army and its death squads were killing over 500 people per month, and we knew what fate awaited those hostages. The relief workers and our delegation

decided to chase after them. The only weapons we had were cameras. We ran behind them for about 30 minutes along a riverbed, accompanied by the captives' mothers, wives, and children. During the chase, we screamed, "We are going to denounce these atrocities to the world."

As we neared the El Salvadorian border, the possibility that the refugees would be executed became more tangible. As we came within earshot of the death squad, they turned, and pointed their machine guns at us. We heard them yelling, in Spanish: "These sons of bitches have caught up with us!" We screamed back, "You will have to kill us all!"

For a moment, the world stopped. I felt my heart pounding in my chest, and I was gripped with fear. But then, for some unbeknownst reason, they let us, and the refugees, go free. I am still at a loss to explain why. It defies logic and reason. Looking back now, I believe it to have been an act of God.

This "suspended moment in time" was a turning point in my life. I realised that for the refugees we had helped to save, "living" simply meant "escaping death". Who knows if those refugees would have survived if foreign observers had not been there with them? It seems unlikely. Hundreds – thousands – millions – have died in similar circumstances, with no-one to shield them, no-one to speak for them, no-one to even remember them.

However frightening this experience was for me, I realised that even the smallest act of courage can save lives, and, perhaps, even change the course of history. I realised that every individual can make a difference. This was the watershed event that marked the beginning of my human rights work.

When I returned to the United States from Honduras, I testified before The Congressional Subcommittee on Inter-American Affairs, to bring greater attention to these atrocities, and to caution Congress about the US Government's role in the regionalisation of the war in Central America.

At first, the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua had presented a viable alternative for the third world: they advocated a popular policy of independence and self-reliance. But it was evident to the US that if the Nicaraguan experiment was to flourish, other countries would follow suit. And that would have given a "bad example" to other Latin American countries vital to American interests. If the Sandinista Revolution had succeeded, it would have meant a loss of billions of dollars of investment throughout Latin America for US corporations.

And so, in 1982, the US began funding the Contra war against the Sandinista Government. In 1984, they mined Corinto harbour, and the world court declared the US a war criminal. Nicaragua had a toll of more than 40,000 so-called 'soft-targets' dead. Nowadays the US would call these innocent victims "collateral damage". The country has never recovered from the war, and is now the second poorest nation in the Western hemisphere. In 1982, I began to speak out against the Contra war and US-sponsored military intervention in Central America.

US policy in Latin America considered for several decades that human rights and democracy were secondary to the fight against the perceived "Communist threat". Any attempt to achieve political change or social justice was perceived as a result of Soviet or Cuban influence.

For example, in 1944, the people of Guatemala overthrew the Dictator Jose Ubico, and subsequently they held their first Democratic election. But the proposed land reform that followed threatened The United Fruit Company (UFCO), the largest banana company in the world, which was one of the big holders of unused land in Guatemala. The company complained to its many friends within the US Government, and President Eisenhower and Secretary of State John Foster Dulles duly concluded that Guatemala had turned Communist.

The CIA orchestrated a coup, and, in 1954, the US overthrew the democratically elected government. They replaced it with a right wing dictatorship that was prepared to bend to The United Fruit Company's demands. After four decades, and various US backed-oppressive governments, Guatemala was left with 200,000 people dead or "disappeared", mostly peasants and Mayan Indians.

Ed Hermann, in his book *The Real Terror Network*, points out that nation-states often engage in what is called "wholesale" terror. The United States has engaged in "wholesale" terror in Latin America throughout the last century. It has done so "in the name of democracy" to fight the "Communist threat". For more than a century, the US Government supported brutal and oppressive governments in Latin America as long as they professed a friendly policy towards the US and were willing to grant US corporations a monopoly to plunder their national resources with total impunity.

PART TWO: AT A CROSSROADS IN HUMAN HISTORY

I have spoken to you so far about the two great influences in my life, my mother and my experiences in Central America.

But what about you? You have worked hard to get here. But I must tell you that it is now that the real hard work begins. Because we are at a crossroads in human history. We face unprecedented threats, both to human security and to the environment. We have witnessed numerous assaults on the rule of law, human rights and civil liberties. And we have entered a dangerous period in world politics, where our politicians are not being held accountable for their deceptions and failures. We are at a number of "tipping points" that threaten to foreclose on our common future.

I speak to many young people in the course of my work. I have realised that your generation has a burden mine never faced: while I was growing up, there was not the instability and unrest around the world that there is today. There was not the urgent and alarming problem of climate change.

As you leave here today, each one of you has many opportunities before you. But you also have a great responsibility: a responsibility to play your part in forging a peaceful world, in which coexistence and dialogue with other nations, races and faiths is possible. A world in which all citizens are equal before the law. You have an opportunity to contribute toward saving the planet – to redress the wrongs of your parents' and grandparents' generations, and set the world back on the path of peace, the rule of law, respect for human rights and harmony with nature.

9/11 and the erosion of civil liberties

One of the most pressing concerns that faces us today is the erosion of civil liberties. George W. Bush and the present administration have done everything possible to change the United States, from a nation that used to place a high value on privacy and freedom to one that embraces security and safety above all other concerns. He has swapped freedom, civil liberties and human rights for safety. But his reordering of priorities has not made America any safer.

What is most disturbing about Bush's philosophy is his belief that that civil liberties can become subject to cancellation in times of crisis, in contradiction to a Constitution that seeks to protect rights the founding fathers deemed inalienable.

Human Rights First documented the erosion of civil liberties in a report entitled "Assessing the New Normal: Liberty and Security for the Post-September 11 United States". Michael Posner, Executive Director of Human Rights First, in a speech to the American Bar Association Center for Human Rights in 2005, said, "Historically, Americans have held a presumption that their government should be largely open to public scrutiny. James Madison, the fourth President of the United States, once wrote, 'A popular government without popular information, or the means of acquiring it, is but a prologue to farce or tragedy or perhaps both.'"

The Bush administration has played out that prologue, taking actions over the last seven years that, in the words of Michael Posner, "dramatically changed the relationship between the government and its people". The "war on terror" is the phrase used by Bush's administration to explain the military, political and legal strategies of the last seven years. It has been used to justify violations of international law, pre-emptive strikes and large-scale human rights abuses.

I was in New York on 9/11. Like many throughout the world, I was shocked and outraged by this act of heinous barbarity. I was desperate to understand why there was so much enmity against this country. I knew that we needed to grasp the root causes of such hatred. And that this horror should incite us to look beyond the simple need for an act of retaliation. I had experienced the worst of US foreign policy first-hand Latin America. But we would never have thought to strike back like this.

The *New York Times* ran an editorial in 2001, stating, "Shortly after the brutal attacks of September 11th and the subsequent military campaign in Afghanistan, President Bush and his administration developed a parallel criminal justice system, circumventing, decree by decree, the oversight of Congress and the Courts." These military-style tribunals, now called commissions, independent from, and not accountable to, the normal judicial system, were and are empowered with the death penalty as a possible sentence, with no right of appeal. The *New York Times'* William Safire then wrote, "In an Orwellian twist, Bush's order calls this Soviet-style abomination 'a full and fair trial'."

Perhaps in response to critics, who questioned whether the President had the authority to set up military tribunals without Congressional approval, President Bush signed into effect the Military Commissions Act in 2006. The Act formalised the power of what William Safire called the "kangaroo courts", and put an end to "the shifting series of explanations" from the Justice

Department as to why indefinite detentions were necessary. It also flew in the face of human rights, and violated the US Constitution. It denies *habeas corpus* to “alien unlawful enemy combatants”. But each of those terms – “alien”, “unlawful”, “enemy” and “combatant” – is subject to interpretation.

In the detention camp at Guantánamo Bay, around 350 of these so-called “enemy combatants” are still being held, pending trial or release, of a total of 775 people brought to the camp since the start of the war in Afghanistan. Both former detainees of Guantánamo Bay and Red Cross inspectors have recounted the use of torture at that facility, including sleep deprivation, truth drugs and beatings. Amnesty International have called the conditions at Guantánamo “a human rights scandal”. We must demand the immediate closure of this facility, and we must demand that the detainees are transferred to the regular judicial system for truly full and truly fair trials.

It is now common knowledge that the Military Commissions Act makes it possible for indefinite detentions without trial, but what you may not know is that the Act also makes it much more difficult to prosecute US government officers and employees for misconduct while in office. There is no reason to suppose that, should it become desirable or convenient, that such “emergency measures” should not be turned on any of us in this room. We have been down this road before: secret trials without juries are an ideal breeding ground for prejudice and injustice. Not just for Muslims, foreigners, or any other non-Caucasians. But, for every single one of us, perhaps even you.

In April 2007, the Supreme Court declined to hear two cases challenging the MCA. They would not even consider that the Act might be unconstitutional. But on June 29, 2007, the court reversed that decision, and, since then, the two cases have been consolidated into one. These cases are in progress as I speak.

The “war on terror” gave politicians all over the world the excuse they needed to seriously undermine civil liberties. Those obstructive things called “human rights”, which got in the way of policing and regulating populations, have been steadily eroded ever since. In this country, the PATRIOT act and the Digital Millennium Copyright Act – both of which will affect each one of you significantly as you go about your professional and personal lives in the years to come – are both efforts to curtail the rights and freedoms each of us has as his or her birthright. The PATRIOT act in particular, which was rushed through the Senate after 9/11, gives law enforcement and secret services extraordinary powers to infringe on our liberties, rights and privacy, contrary to the spirit of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence.

On March 9, 2007, the Justice Department ruled that the FBI had “improperly and, in some cases, illegally, used the PATRIOT Act to secretly obtain personal information” about United States citizens. On June 15 of the same year, an internal audit found that FBI agents had abused the PATRIOT Act power more than 1,000 times.

Since the arrival of President Bush, lost are the US’s historic commitments to constitutional protections of individual rights, a strong and independent judiciary, and open government, which have shaped many other societies. The “war on terror” saw America break faith with its own standards, hypocritically employing extraordinary rendition, secret prisons, and torture whilst denying due process and condemning these methods elsewhere in the world.

The erosion of civil liberties in the US since September 11 has had a deeply negative effect globally in two different ways. Human rights advocates in other societies have long cited the American example in their own domestic struggles, but their ability to do so is now greatly diminished. Today, repressive governments around the world are more likely to cite the American example. In Russia, China, Egypt and Libya, to name a few, we are seeing a cynical reliance on the US “war on terrorism” to justify undemocratic policies and actions.

Liberty, the rule of law, due process, and judicial review should be the underpinning of the United States’ justice system. These values are what the terrorists hope to destroy. But if we curtail, suspend or eliminate our constitutional liberties, and bill of rights, the terrorists have won. As William Safire puts it, “We will be judged not by how we hold to our values when it is easy, but when it is difficult. The world is watching.”

The message from security experts and policy organisations is clear: the war on terror has consolidated opposition to the US, it has aided terrorist recruitment, and it has increased the likelihood of attacks against the US and its allies. In 2005, the Oxford Research Group published a paper that said, “Far from winning the ‘war on terror’, the second George W. Bush administration is maintaining policies that are ... actually increasing violent anti-Americanism.”

No lasting peace has ever been achieved with the summary execution of those deemed responsible for threatening it. We now need an urgent wake-up call. The media, NGOs, the legal profession and the public at large must hold governments accountable, demanding greater transparency and more open debates about the scope of government authority in gathering records and conducting surveillance.

Iraq

The war in Iraq was from the outset an immoral, illegal and unwinnable war. What is so astonishing about the horrific stories and statistics surrounding it is that the politicians responsible have not been held accountable. Despite the fact that the war has been an unqualified disaster, they have not been called to account. If George W. Bush and Tony Blair had presided as CEOs over comparable deceptive and fraudulent practices in a big corporation, they would have been immediately and unceremoniously sacked.

Based on estimates from the congressional budget office, the cost of the war to the U.S. is in the trillions. This is a number none of us can really understand. But what we can certainly understand is the consequences this will have for future generations. Imagine the great things that could have been achieved – the scientific innovations, the advances in human understanding, the schools, hospitals and universities that could have been built. What a tragic and unspeakable waste.

And that is just the financial cost. According to an estimate published on September 14, 2007 by ORB, an independent British polling agency, the total Iraqi violent death toll due to the war is in excess of 1.2 million. We can add to this figure over 4,000 US soldiers who have died. Approximately 30,000 US soldiers have been seriously wounded. Over four million refugees have been created, more than 16% of the Iraqi population: two million of them have fled the

country, and approximately 2.5 million have been internally displaced. A May 25, 2007 article in the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* stated that in the past seven months only 69 people from Iraq have been granted refugee status in the United States. Human rights abuses have been permitted, and even perpetrated, by the occupying nations. These include the torture and abuse at Abu Ghraib.

So where does this leave us? During my twenty-five years of campaigning for the defence of human rights in Latin America, Bosnia, Kosovo, Asia and the US, I have come to the sad realization that individuals are not always regarded as equal before the law. That their faith, their nationality, the colour of their skin and their status all influence the way justice is adjudicated to them. The paradox about the US is that it prides itself on being, and I am quoting President Bush here, “The brightest beacon of democracy”. You are tomorrow’s leaders. It will be up to you to make America “a beacon of democracy” once again.

In the end, if we want to eradicate terrorism, this will not be achieved by waging wars on oppressed, ravaged nations. It will not be achieved by drafting legislation that will deprive us of our cherished civil liberties and freedom. It will not be achieved by giving up due process and judicial review. It will not be achieved by indefinite detention without appeal. It will certainly not be achieved by erecting walls of barbed wire, separating us from those who, perhaps rightly, resent us.

Climate chaos

But, sadly, warmongering and the steady erosion of civil liberties and human rights are by no means the only, nor the greatest, challenges we will face in the years ahead. A year ago, I was elected Chair of the World Future Council, an international non-governmental organisation. Our stated aim is to provide a voice for future generations. Over the last year, we have worked to raise awareness about the solutions to climate change – or, as we prefer to call it, climate chaos. I believe that finding ways to avoid the impending global climate disaster is the overriding moral imperative of this century.

The problem of climate chaos touches every area of our lives: peace, security, human rights, poverty, hunger, health, mass migration, and economics. Climate change is not an isolated environmental issue: everything is inextricably linked.

In an article called “A Last Chance for Civilisation”, Bill McKibben introduces what he calls “the most important number on Earth”: 350. He is referring to the parts per million of carbon dioxide in the air. Quoting NASA’s James Hansen, one of our foremost climatologists, he explains that we must rapidly lower the level of carbon dioxide in our atmosphere “if we wish to preserve a planet similar to that on which civilization developed”. If we do not make 350 the most important number on Earth, future generations will be faced with surviving on an overheated planet. They will have no option but to devote time, resources and energy to managing the consequences of their ancestors’ short-sightedness.

Hansen cites six irreversible tipping points. Among them are massive sea level rise and huge changes in rainfall patterns. If we do not return to 350 parts per million of carbon dioxide in the

atmosphere quickly, from our current level of 385 parts per million, we will pass these tipping points very soon. The first of them, the melting of the polar ice caps, may already be behind us.

Despite the clear and urgent alarms sounded by our most respected scientists, the developed world continues to feed its out-of-control oil addiction. We are locked into an inefficient, pollution-based economy, which is undermining public health and the environment, aggravating inequality.

In one of the most shocking examples of short-sightedness and ignorance, President Bush has for the last eight years engaged in a relentless effort to permit drilling for oil in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. Drilling into this strip of tundra has been an energy priority for Bush and other Republican leaders in Congress for years, because it is estimated that between 4.3 and 11.8 billion barrels of recoverable oil lie underneath the surface. Until now, the Senate has consistently blocked them. But how long before Bush, or one of his ilk, succeeds in destroying this precious natural habitat?

According to OilOnIce.com, online home of the famous documentary of the same name, the recoverable reserves of oil underneath would last the US just 200 days. In the 50 years it would take to extract it all, the reserves would meet less than 1% of the country's demand. Offering his plan to expand renewable energy as an alternative to the proposal for oil drilling in the Arctic Refuge, Senator Kerry said: "The United States of America can't drill its way out of this predicament; we have to invent our way out of it."

That's where your generation comes in. You are our social workers, nurses, teachers, bankers and industrial leaders. You have the tools to innovate, within the bounds of morality and sustainability, to discover new ways of working with the planet, rather than exploiting and destroying it.

I would like to quote a disturbing vision of how things could end, written by a journalist from Uruguay called Eduardo Galeano.

Poisoned is the earth that inters or deters us. There is no air, only despair; no breeze, only sleaze. No rain, except acid rain. No parks, just parking lots. No partners only partnerships. Companies instead of nations. Consumers instead of citizens. Conglomerations instead of cities. No people only audiences. No relations, except public relations. No vision, just television. To praise a flower, say "It looks plastic..."

It sounds like a terrifying vision of the future, doesn't it? But it's from "View of Dusk at the end of the Century", written in 1998. Galeano wasn't talking about the future. He was writing about the world ten years ago.

There is no denying it: the rich world is causing climate change and the poor world is suffering. The industrial countries that have pioneered fossil fuel technology are primarily in the cold north, while the warmer countries of the south still use far less oil, gas and coal. As climate change kicks in, the tropical and subtropical countries of Africa, South Asia and Latin America will heat up to the point of being intolerable. Droughts will affect large parts of Africa, Asia and Latin America. Melting glaciers will flood river valleys and then, when they have disappeared,

unprecedented droughts will occur. Poor, low-lying countries such as Bangladesh will find it much harder to cope with sea level rise than Holland or Florida.

If current trends are allowed to continue, hundreds of millions of people in the poorer countries will lose their homes as well as the land on which they grow their crops. And then there is the threat of diseases: By the end of the century 182 million people in sub-Saharan Africa alone could die of diseases directly attributable to climate change, according to Christian Aid.

Never before has humanity been so overwhelmed by such massive and urgent concerns. We are experiencing explosive population growth: the world's population is forecast to reach 9.2 billion by 2050. Since 1992, there has been a 50% increase in world energy consumption. Another 50% rise is expected in the next fifteen years. We now know that if we remain locked into an inefficient, polluting, fossil-fuel based global economy, we will exhaust the Earth's natural resources and we will accelerate climate change.

It is becoming clear that the rich countries need to take vigorous measures to rapidly reduce their dependence on fossil fuels, and to accelerate the development of renewable energy as the basis of a whole new energy system for the planet. "Climate justice" means giving the poorer countries privileged access to renewable energy technologies to help them with truly sustainable development. The Kyoto treaty's "clean development mechanism" was a useful start, but much more needs to be done. Only if we can show the plausibility of development without fossil fuels, can we encourage third world countries to initiate their own emissions reductions.

Economic and urban development in the last 200 years has largely been at the expense of the world's ecosystems. Forest cover across the world has been reduced by about 50 per cent and the indigenous people, particularly in the tropics, have suffered terribly in the process. Ways have to be found to pay developing countries for the global "ecosystem services" provided by their forest cover – and their capacity to absorb carbon dioxide and to release moisture to distance places. Under the auspices of climate justice this is a historic responsibility, and it needs to benefit the poorer tropical and subtropical countries of the world and their people above all else.

As Bill McKibben points out, we are the ones who kicked off global warming. But now, the planet is taking over the job. McKibben gives the example of a particular species of beetle which, "encouraged by warmer temperatures, has already managed to kill ten times more trees than in any previous infestation across the northern reaches of Canada this year. This means far more carbon heading for the atmosphere and apparently dooms Canada's efforts to comply with the Kyoto Protocol, already in doubt because of its decision to start producing oil for the U.S. from Alberta's tar sands." Now that the Arctic ice is melting, what was previously a shield of ice reflecting 80% of solar radiation back into space is now, as water, absorbing 80% of the sun's heat.

Given the scale of this impending disaster, we have no choice but to embark upon a global renewable energy revolution, by replacing our carbon-driven economy with a renewable energy economy. The challenge we are facing now is how to switch to a more secure, lower-carbon energy system that does not undermine economic and social development, and addresses the threats of climate change and global inequality.

Although some more pessimistic scientists warn that we have already passed the tipping point of climate chaos, and that human intervention is now futile, I like to think that is not yet the case. I am convinced that if we act now we can save our world and ourselves. So long as it is possible, however remotely, then it is an overriding moral imperative to try.

But we are not just aiming for a set of goals. This is not a checklist by which our success can be measured. It's no good to have four out of five, or even nine out of ten. We have to aim for a virtuous circle of morally sound principles and practices. We are reaching a threshold from which there will be no return. If we do not hold our politicians accountable for their decisions; if we do not improve energy efficiency; if we do not bring immediate and serious investment in renewable energy – if we are not prepared to do these things, we may not have a world left protecting before very long. There is no time for further excuses, postponement, or procrastination. This is a time for courage and leadership, and for positive and immediate action.

In October of last year, Barack Obama called climate change “one of the greatest moral challenges of our generation”. Our lives and the lives of our children and their children are at stake. We have allowed Bush to hold our future to ransom. We have run the risk of condemning future generations to the ravages of global warming. Setting America on the path to oil independence must be the focus of the next few decades. If we do not act now, the battle will be lost.

PART THREE: THE CHOICES AHEAD

As you leave college and begin your professional lives, you will be faced with many choices. Some of these will be serious moral dilemmas, and the choices you make as tomorrow's leaders will determine the fate of our planet.

Finding solutions to the world's problems has an urgency that demands radical and complete reform of the way we see the world and the way we live our lives.

If we want to preserve the planet for future generations, we require a Copernican revolution in our outlook. Each and every one of us must be prepared to make fundamental, lasting and immediate change. This cannot be about egos or agendas; it must be about the way we see the world and the way we see ourselves.

We are reaching a threshold from which there will be no return. We must hold our politicians accountable for their decisions. We must fight for universal respect for human rights and dignity, the abolition of the death penalty, and the prohibition of torture. We must call for worldwide nuclear disarmament. Otherwise, we may not have a world left that is worth protecting.

I hope I haven't spoken with too much “doom and gloom” today. I know that looking forward at the great dilemmas facing your generation must be daunting. But I would like to think that I have given you some hope that anything is possible. I was just a young girl from a poor country in Latin America. But I have lived a rich, exciting and wonderful life, for which I am grateful. There's no reason why each of you, with the privilege of a college education, can make a real change.

Going out into the world after college is an exhilarating time. But we must realise: the world today is dangerous, and its future uncertain. We must all work to guarantee the survival of our planet, of the human species, and of future generations. That doesn't mean we can't enjoy ourselves along the way.

In my life I have witnessed the scourge of war in Central America, the horrors of mass rape and genocide in Bosnia & Herzegovina, the atrocities committed against indigenous people in Latin America, the ravaging effect of HIV and AIDS in Africa and the growing practice of trafficking innocent children for sexual exploitation in South East Asia. I have fought against the death penalty in America, spoken out against the proliferation of nuclear weapons, and campaigned for environmental protection. I am glad I was able to share with you today some of the lessons I have learned in the last twenty-five years.

I have tried throughout my life to act according to my moral convictions, to make a difference, to speak out for those who cannot speak for themselves. I have tried to make the world a better place. But I have also had a full and exciting life doing it. We all have an obligation, I believe – in however large or small a way – to make the world around us just that little bit better, if we can.

I have every confidence that you will rise to meet the great challenges ahead of you. I believe in the power of the individual to make a difference.

We must do everything in our power to help sustain life on earth, with all its beauty and diversity, and to speak up for peace and justice between the world's peoples and countries.

So good-bye, and good luck. I wish each of you every success, and every happiness.