Congratulations on completing your education in the most practical school at IUPUI – the School of Liberal Arts. This may be the first and last time you hear someone refer to the liberal arts as practical, but I mean it. You see, I believe our society is undergoing a radical transformation, and the hands that will guide us through it will be yours, not those of the men and women graduating today from the many fine specialty schools of this university.

How wrenching is this transformation? We may have witnessed fundamental change of a similar scope before, but never at this pace. Advances in science and technology are creating a world that seems literally without limits. And without limits, there is no discipline. Without discipline, civil society cannot exist.

Discipline is at the heart of all religious doctrine and belief. Education is not possible without discipline. Without discipline, government doesn’t work – laws cannot be made and order cannot be kept. (There is not a fraction enough police officers in Indianapolis to keep chaos from reigning if the vast majority of our people don’t police themselves.) Businesses cannot grow and create jobs without discipline. And without discipline, the family unit, in any form, could not exist.

Don’t worry. I didn’t come here today to give you a lecture on discipline. Discipline is just a tool, albeit an important one. It is the tool that gives meaning to our values. A basic set of shared values is what differentiates a civil society from mere packs of humans living like wild animals. But values are just slogans if we lack the discipline to at least attempt to live by them.

So how does the breakneck pace of scientific and technological change erode discipline and undermine the values that hold our society together? And what can we do about it? It is easier to address the first question than the second.

Ask a parent today to tell you how easy it is to control the media that bombard their children – through the internet, satellite and cable TV, i-pods, cell phones, and other devices that I’m vaguely aware are on the market, but that I’d have to ask my teenage daughter to explain. Our children’s attitudes and views of the world are influenced enormously by anonymous forces that are often invisible to us as parents. It’s easy to overly romanticize the good-old days, but parents thirty years ago had far more control over the flow of information to their kids.
Look at what has happened to self-discipline. Do we really need to worry about what we eat when either pharmaceuticals or surgical procedures exist, or will be created any day now, that will erase the consequences of our bad choices? What meaning does the old maxim that “successful investing requires discipline” have in a world of internet day-traders?

Science and technology will never, of course, eradicate all limits. It’s hard to imagine the demise of death, for example; which means a fair number of religious and philosophical questions will remain on the table for some time to come. But science and technology will keep trying to break through all barriers – it’s their job.

So how do we set limits in this increasingly limitless world? Human limits in the absence of technological ones. Where do we find the discipline that gives meaning to our values, and thus preserves our civilization? That’s where the liberal arts come in.

Don’t look for much help from your fellow IUPUI graduates who will be inventing the new technologies. Are they supposed to stop inventing? Accept the inevitability of devastating diseases? Look away from ways to make cars safer in crashes? Don’t turn to those entering the profit-driven business world either. They won’t stop themselves; and they shouldn’t. In a free-market economy, it is their responsibility to make money.

No, I’m afraid to tell you, it’s your job! The good news is, your friends pursuing careers in technology and business want you to take the lead on this. They want to live in a world with human-imposed limits and meaningful values as much as you do.

There is something in you that drove you to study anthropology. You chose political science for some reason other than the number of professional political scientists on the Forbes 400 list of the richest Americans. You are graduating today with a degree in geography because it’s your passion, not because you think it will help you find hidden gold reserves . . . I don’t think!

Every one of your majors is about people, not machines. That’s why they called our school humanities and social science when I received my liberal arts degree from Purdue. Even those of you who ultimately go into business, law, nursing, or even engineering will find that your liberal arts education sets you apart. You, ladies and gentlemen, are the ones in position to rescue our civilization from the most dehumanizing aspects of the march of scientific progress.

Some of you must be thinking, there’s really not much I can contribute to this civilization-saving business. All the easy stuff has been done, and for the
hard stuff there are a lot of people more qualified than me – people with PhDs, MDs, MBAs, math prodigies, physics whizzes, even computer hackers. OK, then, why haven’t any of these geniuses:

- Figured out how to eliminate the achievement gap for minority students in primary and secondary education?
- Been able to stop the trend toward destructiveness in American politics that has left Washington in shambles – no responsibility, no accountability, and no respect from the American people.
- Stopped the obesity epidemic that I predict – and I’m going out on a limb here – will take more lives than the bird flu?

I could go on all day listing our challenges. It is not just a cliché to say that, for you, they are opportunities. All the ones I just listed will be fixed or improved dramatically, I am certain, in my lifetime. But they won’t be fixed by a computer program!

Make a silent promise to me, if you will, that you will always be proud to say you are a liberal arts graduate. When your brother-in-law who graduated from business school jokes that he’ll probably have to support you, tell him that you’ll be happy to take his money. Then sit back and enjoy the satisfaction that comes from knowing that you not only made the choice that was right for you, but that you have a chance many others never will to single-handedly change the world.

Thank you.