

Quinnipiac University
Undergraduate Commencement May 18, 2008
Speaker: Lisa Ling

Thank you all so much. President Lahey, family and friends, Quinnipiac Class of 2008. You're all looking fine in your caps and gowns today. Especially after senior week- I'm so impressed. I am deeply, deeply honored to be here on this highly auspicious day. Thank you so much for this degree. I can only imagine what you all are feeling right now, a mixture of excitement and anxiety. I can only imagine that because I never actually made it to graduation myself at the University of Southern California because I started working for a news program called Channel One News that sent me all over the world to cover stories--it was kind of like a graduate school for me. When I was 21 years old, close to your age, in 1994, I volunteered to cover the civil war in Afghanistan. It was a country that at the time I could barely identify on a map. In fact, most of the adults in my world could barely identify it as well.

And never in my wildest dreams did I ever imagine that I would go to a place like Afghanistan. And although my security couldn't be entirely guaranteed when I went, I would be going in with the Red Cross and at the time, NGO's were very well regarded in the world.

So one summer day, this 21 year old kid ends up in Jalabad, Afghanistan, and as I'm descending from the stairs of the Red Cross plane, I am in an utter state of shock by the scene that meet me...I'm immediately surrounded by throngs of little boys who are carrying kalashnikovs and bazookas and RPGs. And I said to my escort, how old are these little boys? They look no more than 10. And he said they do not know. But if you ask them to how operate bazooka, they know. And it became clear to me that these boys would just sit and day after day after day, hour after hour, just wait to fire those weapons. And I so vividly recall thinking at the time, what's going to happen to these boys 10 years from now? That was 1994 and 10 years from now just happened a couple of years ago.

What actually disturbed me more than that experience was when I came home to the United States, I was still in shock and experiencing culture shock from what I had just experienced, and I tried to engage my friends and my colleagues about what I had just seen. And they had absolutely no clue of what I was talking about, that that scene existed in the world, despite the fact that in all likelihood most of the weapons that the boys were carrying were probably paid for by the United States.

I was just astounded by the fact that no one in our media was talking about this story and I just had a feeling in my gut that it wouldn't be the last time I would hear about Afghanistan. This image of the boys still continues to haunt me. It's left an indelible imprint in my mind and it fueled my passion to want to pursue journalism. It really was accidental: initially my objective was to try and figure out a way to get a job on television.

But I was so deeply and profoundly affected by what I had experienced in Afghanistan that I had to chart a new path for myself--I couldn't just turn my back and pretend that what I had seen there didn't exist. And I used what I had learned in school and my ability to think critically to supplement that desire to want to communicate those kinds of stories.

Now I'm not telling anyone here go off to Afghanistan, parents—I promise that's not the message I'm trying to convey. But for me, traveling outside of my comfort zone--way out of it in fact--and exposing myself to things foreign and things that changed my perspective was so incredibly enlightening for me. It became so much bigger than a job, it was no longer about trying to make more money: it became about trying to figure out a way to tell these stories.

But that's not so easy to do, as you know, it seems news organizations these days are too preoccupied with gossip to cover substantive international stories with depth. So I decide to do something sort of unexpected, something many people in the journalism world warned me against: I set out to get a job at "The View"- the daytime television talk show which was hiring at the time and--as you know--was not considered a news outlet, it's an entertainment show. So many people told me that I'd ruin my credibility by going to this non-news outlet, but I knew that if I could get a job at "The View," I could raise my profile enough to be able to better dictate the kinds of stories that I would do. And it worked. I did the show for 3 years and when I decided to leave there, people again thought I was crazy. It was a hugely high profile, network show.

But as we embarked upon the two wars in which we are currently engaged, I just felt compelled to take the skills that I'd learned as a young reporter and go back to doing what I loved: journalism. Even though I was offered multiple jobs at little-known shows like "Dancing with the Star," again, it wasn't about being on television...it was about making the right choices and pursuing what I wanted to do. I still wasn't ready to go to a network news show because as you know I'd probably be resigned to covering Anna Nicole Smith-type stories.

Then I found out that National Geographic, that it was starting a cable network. As you know, National Geographic is the foremost authority on natural history and the animal world, but they had never delved too deeply into current events or social issues. I relentlessly pursued them to bring me on to tell global, human stories and they agreed. Now their cable network was in its infancy. It had a tiny, tiny viewership and was in a fraction of the homes that "The View" was in. I took a big pay cut and went from this network show with millions of viewers to a show, brand new one, that would be seen by 50,000 people on a good day.

Everyone--including my family and my agents and my friends thought I was crazy to leave such a renowned, popular show. But again, it wasn't about the job, it was about what I wanted to do...it was about figuring out what drove my passion--and that was journalism. Because I stuck to my passion and worked desperately hard, my work was eventually noticed by someone you may have heard of: Oprah Winfrey

And that is my wish for you today. That you will discover your passion and pursue it. That although you are receiving your degree today, you will continue to be a student of the world and of life. That you will take this education that you have spent your entire lifetime acquiring and use the skills that you've learned to open your mind to things that drive your passion. The smartest and most creative people I know are people who have allowed themselves to be open these experiences--whether through travel, or by engaging people in conversations—if they've opened themselves up to be exposed to things that are different from what they experience day to day, they are more enlightened people.

Be open to all possibilities, be open to being a sponge that is constantly soaking things up that widen your perspective. Perhaps a speaker will ignite something, but be open to it. You are limited only by your own inhibitions and your own mind. You may ask a lot of questions of people and seek others' guidance, but never let anyone tell you that there is only one way.

I know that many of you are nervous about your future...we all are. Our news has been filled with some pretty disturbing figures and statistics of late and of the state of the world in general—but I'll say this to you once because it's true: you are only this age once. And I'm going to go on a limb and assume that most of you aren't married yet with kids and burdened with a mortgage. There may never be a better time to really stop and figure out what drives you. There will always be jobs...there will be years when it's harder to get jobs, but they but will be there. And by the time you're my age, you may have had a couple or more jobs. But if it is success that you seek, I guarantee you, you'll be far more successful in a multitude of things if you are driven by your passion. In fact, I have never heard a highly successful person say I hate what I'm doing, I'm bored.

So today, Quinnipiac Class 2008--or 2000-great as I'm going to call you—YES--you graduate from being shuttled around...literally. You are in the driver's seat now. And I'm sure there will be times when all you want to do is turn around and go back to Toad's...but you are on a new road now and only you with the help of THIS but sometimes more importantly THIS can dictate your path. Thank you all so much and congratulations.