Ride the buses, walk the sidewalks, or bike along the gutters of Los Angeles, and you’ll encounter much of what a college degree from a prestigious university gives us the luxury to forget: poverty, hunger, and homelessness. But the poorest Angelino is rather well-off in relation to much of the world. Each and every day, 20,000 people – fully half of today’s commencement audience – die simply because they are too poor to stay alive. This is an unsettling thought. Today, as we receive degrees that provide endless opportunity for professional and financial success, we may rightly feel uneasy. But that’s a good thing. Too often, we rationalize away our discomfort by saying: we deserve our success. And isn’t this taking the easy way out? If we wish not to help others, this mind-set convicts us little. For if our success is simply the product of our worthiness, then those who are less successful don’t deserve it – at least not as much as we do. This attitude is the status quo. And I believe that it falls short. I wish to challenge it, and I wish to challenge us.
So I ask: why do we, as people of privilege, so eagerly consider ourselves deserving of our status? Logical support for such an attitude must appeal to those factors which have led to our success – for these are what would seem to distinguish us from others less privileged. As students, the two such factors we may appeal to are intelligence and hard work. And I believe that both of these answers fail.

First, these explanations assume that we are either more intelligent or more hard-working than others. I doubt such claims. We are certainly an intelligent bunch; but I grew up working on turkey and dairy farms, and I can assure you that many of America’s workers in the lowest income bracket have brilliant minds. And though we have exerted enormous effort in our academic careers, do we really believe our efforts exceed those of the African farmer, or the Bangladeshi sweatshop worker, or the Kentuckian coal miner?

But for the sake of argument, let’s pretend. Let’s suppose for the moment that we are the most intelligent and hard-working humans in the entire world. Could possessing intelligence and work ethic allow us to conclude that we are deserving of the success they bring? Perhaps – but
only if our possession of intelligence and work ethic is somehow a result of our own action. For it would seem presumptuous indeed to take credit for the natural result of factors that are out of our control. Let us ask, then: what is the extent of our role in determining these characteristics? Regarding intelligence, the answer is easy. For intelligence is the product of the architecture of our particular version of the human brain: and we took no part in designing that. But what is to be said of hard work? Here we come to the crux of our discussion, we are tempted to say: for surely we have made a conscious decision to work hard. We have chosen to spend nights in the library, instead of in our beds. And we have sometimes had to sacrifice time with friends to spend time with textbooks. Such sentiments, however, are convenient oversimplifications. In praise of effort, we must remember that effort is the result of motivation, and motivation the result of a complex blend of social environment and psychological chemistry – neither of which we control in full.

Where does this leave us, then? We are in a position of vast opportunity, and as far as I can tell, we are unable to establish our
particular worthiness of this position. Our success, it seems, must be at least partially attributed either to blind luck or simple Providence. Each of us must choose for ourselves which of these to credit. Personally, I choose Providence. But my choice necessitates the question: why me? If my success is due to Providence, and there are others less successful than I, I must question the fairness of Providence. In my opinion, the answer to this question lies in the following: success is not an end, but a means. As people of privilege, we may choose to use our economic power and social status not for our own advancement, but to help those in need. And I believe we have the responsibility to do so. For “from him to whom much has been given, much will be expected”: and we have been given much.

But we are diverse in thought – and many will disagree with me. Perhaps you find the idea of Providence unsatisfactory. What is to become of us if we choose to credit our success to luck? Doesn’t this remove all responsibility to our fellow man? If our gifts are given by no one in particular, who shall hold us responsible for their proper use? But let us be careful here. I said before that our success could be partially
attributed to luck. Our intelligence, our psychology, and even our social environment may be attributed to fortune – but the effects of that environment may not. For what I have rather coldly labeled our “social environment” is, in reality, a massive collection of complex individuals with free will: parents, siblings, friends, mentors, professors, fellow Trojans, and the citizens of South-Central Los Angeles. And that environment’s effects on us are the results of these people’s conscious, willful action. We may be lucky to have been born to supportive parents, but it is their choice to support us. We may be lucky to have been able to attend USC – but the effect that the community here has had on us is the result of individuals’ choices to intervene in our lives. Quantum physics tells us that the future state of every physical system is, to a certain degree, unpredictable – that there is not one inevitable future, but many possible futures. In much the same way, our success was not determined at birth – it has been shaped along the way by those who have chosen to shape it. Humanity, then, has given us much. And if we seek to uphold any ideas of equality or fairness, then we must concede that we owe humanity at least as much as it has given us. Let us go, then, and serve
humanity as we ride the buses, walk the sidewalks, and bike along the gutters of Los Angeles, or New Orleans, or Baghdad, or Nyala.

Humanity has given us much. Let us go now, and give it back.