Thanks for the kind introduction.

It seems a short twenty-three years since I arrived on this campus to begin my responsibilities as president of John Tyler Community College. It has been my privilege over that time to work with outstanding colleagues in the faculty, staff, and administration to change the lives of our students. It has been my privilege to lead this institution towards a bright future. I also am honored and humbled to offer the commencement address today, my last graduation day among you.

Now, and this is the most important thing I’m going to say today – the most important thing a graduating class can do is to remember vividly the commencement speaker for years after the event and most especially, the contents of the speech. For the rest of your life, random people will approach you and ask, “Who was your commencement speaker at John Tyler in 2013 and what did he or she say?” I know just by looking at you that you will have your answer prepared.

In fact, to be memorable, the speaker must be either brilliant or brief. I gave that some thought and opted for brilliance – after all, time is no object. I shared that thought with my wife, Sheila. She took only a moment to reflect, and said,
“Try for brief instead – at least you’ve got a fighting shot at that!” So brief I will be.

In thinking about this morning and in thinking about other commencements – and believe me, I’ve been to a lot of commencements – I knew that I could go in many traditional directions.

I could start with the thesis that ‘your class will change the world.’ Well, I hope it does, and preferably for the better, but I believe you’ve heard it before.

I could say that technology is revolutionizing the world. If you’re not too busy stealthily texting friends and family in the audience while I say it, you will hardly be amazed at the thought.

I could encourage you to be lifelong learners, but since you’ve made it here, you already know there’s no choice but to be one in today’s world.

I could advise you to love your fellow man, practice good citizenship, and be involved in your community. If you are already inclined to these points of view, my words might motivate you to a degree.

But I decided against all of these. Instead, I’m turning the tables on you. I have in front of me the ultimate final examination. I offer three questions for your reflection. In fact, you can’t have your diploma until you have considered them.

Here they are:

- **Where were you?**
Where are you?

How far have you come?

Listen again:

Where were you?

Where are you?

How far have you come?

Let’s think about your journey. Some of you took preparatory courses prior to beginning your preferred program of study. Some were honors graduates of high school. Some of you are nineteen or twenty years old; others slightly more than that. Some of you were very apprehensive about ‘college’ and some of you took it for granted that you would be here. Some knew exactly what you wanted to study; others had no clue. Regardless, you are a different person today than you were when you began at John Tyler two years, four years, or more ago.

Where were you?

Where are you?

How far have you come?

As I said, you are not the same person you were. Your self-esteem is greater, your confidence is more expansive, your knowledge of the world is deeper, your understanding of those around you has grown, you have an appreciation for what it takes to learn successfully. You have learned that there is good in most everyone,
and a little bad as well. You know to judge people by their character and not by external appearances. You know what it will take to make it in life. You know the value of higher education.

Are there circumstances you all shared during this process? How did this all happen? There are at least four commonalities, perhaps more, that affected all of you.

First, you didn’t do it alone. It’s often said that if we see great distances, it is because we stand on the shoulders of others. You had help all along the way. You had support from family and friends – and a lot of it. You had a counselor take extra time with you. You had a faculty member willing to work with you on particularly difficult class material. A campus police officer showed you the location of your first class. A groundskeeper showed you where to park. You found classmates to study with, had words of encouragement from strangers, and you observed others who had more challenges and difficulties than you had succeed and you took hope from them. In fact, let’s do something: I want the class of 2013 to stand briefly, turn around, and applaud the people who helped you be here.

Secondly, you are here today because this College is what it is. By this I do not mean bricks and mortar. You could have an outstanding academic experience in a church basement, a military facility, a shopping mall, a retail storefront. I know, because this College has taught in all these locations in the past. No, I mean
that the connecting link is people. From your perspective, it is primarily the people you have interacted with during your time here, but there are others. Many others. They were here long before I was, and they began a tradition of excellence at John Tyler forty-six years ago. When I arrived on September 1, 1990, everyone here was well aware that JTCC was the best in Virginia – there was simply no question about it. That conviction preceded us, and it will succeed us when we are gone. And the faculty, and the staff, and the administration with you today feel exactly the same. Quality in academia is a linear progression. It takes time, pride, commitment, persistence. There is no magic elixir for excellence – it requires a dedicated faculty and staff concerned with continuous improvement and holding a clear sense of mission. That is how John Tyler distinguishes itself from the 1,200 other two-year institutions in the United States. That’s how you have distinguished yourselves from 11.6 million students nationwide in two-year institutions. That’s why your degree will stand out from the 550,000 associate degrees that will be conferred this spring.

- Where were you?
- Where are you?
- How far have you come?

Thirdly, you are here because of your personal efforts and persistence. Even though you had help and even though the College provided many services, some
obvious and others less so, you are the one who persevered. You had a job, maybe
two – not easy. You had children, debts, a car in need of repair; there were
unexpected illnesses. There were some temptations, too. The closer the time to the
test, the greater those temptations may have been. Other curricula looked a bit
easier. That really hard course might be put off until a more opportune semester
came along. Anyway, it’s hard to study all the time.

- **Where were you?**
- **Where are you?**
- **How far have you come?**

Fourthly, you had to decide what you wanted to accomplish here. Whether
you selected a technical program, whether you decided to transfer for a
baccalaureate degree, or whether you wished to improve on skills you already
possessed, you had tough choices to make. You made them. Now you are here.
You sacrificed. You may have borrowed money, postponed family vacations, set
aside needed purchases. You made the choice that your future was worth the cost
of these decisions.

In a few minutes, all this will be a part of your past – you will move to new
challenges, new adventures, new life experiences. So what’s the point of my three
questions?
It is simply this: you must remember. You must recall where you were, where you are now, and the details of your journey.

You have been shaped by all that you did here – REMEMBER IT. You have grown intellectually, socially, culturally, because of your time here – APPRECIATE IT. This college has been the best bargain of your life. It has given you the greatest return on your financial investment that it will ever be your privilege to enjoy. HONOR IT. You have received an outstanding education. USE IT. Tell others. After today, you will earn more, understand more, be a better citizen in your community, state, and nation. LIVE YOUR DREAM.

John Tyler Community College is in the business of changing lives, and it has changed your life: Julianna Morgan. And yours: Andrew Hart and Donna Simmons. And yours: Chad Doebler and Thomas Wise. And all the remainder of the Class of 2013.

In conclusion, there is a traditional component to these remarks after all. It is this: in remembering, know now that you have the skills and the knowledge and the self-esteem to succeed. Know that you will succeed. Be proud of your alma mater. Be proud of yourself. BE PROUD OF YOURSELF.

CONGRATULATIONS, congratulations.