

May 21, 2026

Good morning graduates, Class of 2026! Good morning, everybody!

Dear professors, parents, students and guests

Ladies and gentlemen

I am deeply honored to have the opportunity to address the Johns Hopkins University Class of 2026.

The last time I was on this campus was 1988. I was supposed to return a few weeks later to begin my postdoctoral research, but that path unexpectedly closed. I was devastated and could never imagine that 40 years later I would return to the University to receive an honorary doctorate degree and stand on this stage to address you, the graduating class of 2026. You see you never know what the future holds for you and I am so happy to be back!

I grew up in a small Hungarian town of ten thousand people. My family lived in a one room house with no running water. My parents had only elementary school education. My mother was a bookkeeper; my father was a butcher. Early on I learned from them that hard work is part of life, - and how to make sausage! As a little girl I was very curious and fascinated by nature. I liked to watch chickens hatch from eggs, and the plants grow from small seeds. It felt like witnessing miracles! I didn't know a single scientist, but even then, I knew that I wanted to be one.

Over time my curiosity led me to biochemistry and the possibilities of messenger RNA. After decades in the laboratory, through setbacks, terminations, rejections, and years when a few people believed in my work, I kept going because I loved science and I believed it could help people. That journey led to discoveries that transformed medicine and honors I could never imagine, including the Nobel Prize.

In the 50 years since I sat where you are now, I have learned valuable lessons that I would like to share with you today.

## **1. Love your work.**

You will spend most of your life working, so it is important to find work that gives you meaning and joy. If you love your work, you are more likely to work hard, get through challenges, and believe in your own abilities. The environment around you can sometimes feel intimidating. As a small-town girl coming to an American Ivy league school, I was asking myself could I think of something that all those very smart scientists working in that famous university wouldn't. I had to answer YES, why not.

So believe in yourself, do not settle for less than what you are capable of. At the same time, do not waste energy comparing yourself to others. There will be always people who seem to achieve more, earn more, or advance faster. But that kind of comparison can drain your enthusiasm and distract you from your own path.

**Your only meaningful comparison is to the person you were yesterday.**

## **2. Learn to handle stress by focusing on what you can control**

In high school my teacher handed me a book called The Stress of Life by Hans Selye. His ideas stayed with me throughout my life. Selye coined the word 'stress' in the 1930s, and he believed that stress itself is not what destroys us, but how we respond to it.

Life will disappoint you at times. People may underestimate you, reject you, or treat you unfairly. But if you respond with anger or revenge, you will only harm yourself. Carrying a grudge only poisons you.

Instead, try to find gratitude and keep moving forward. When I received awards, I always thanked those who supported me but I also said thanks to those who tried to make my life miserable. They made me work harder and achieve more.

OK, I didn't invite them to Stockholm for my Nobel Prize award ceremony.

Your response to setbacks matters more than the setback itself. If you lose your job, embrace it as a new opportunity. I needed this advice myself as I was terminated from positions several times in my career. Each time, instead of feeling sorry for myself, I focused all my energy to figure out what is next. This was the only thing I could control. I am telling you that without those setbacks, I would not be standing here today.

**Remember: If you want to do something you find a way, if not you will find excuses.**

### **3. Success is never achieved alone**

I met my husband while we were students. He has supported my dreams and every difficult decision. Together, we moved here to the US when we hardly had any money in our pockets and our 2-year-old daughter by our side... all so that I could continue my research. He never told me to stop research when during weekends I was rushing back to the laboratory to do “just one more important experiment” and then returning home with a broken bench-top centrifuge that he had to fix. Our daughter grew up seeing that lifelong commitment to my science and she always encouraged me. She turned out OK, she went on to win 2 Olympic gold medals in rowing for the United States in Beijing and London.

So to the graduating women here today: you do not need to choose between a career and having a family. Choose a partner who believes in your dreams and supports your decisions.

And to everyone here: be that kind of partner, spouse, friend. Success is rarely achieved alone.

And finally let me tell you a story about my daughter. When she was 7 years old and just finished 2<sup>nd</sup> grade, she came home and immediately

started writing a letter. I asked her who you are writing to, and she said to my teacher Misses Wilson, I am thanking her for the wonderful year, we learned so much.

At that moment, I realized that at age 35, I have never sent a letter to my own teachers. But after that, I changed. I began visiting them, calling them, and writing letters, and expressing my gratitude.

So the conclusion: Do not hesitate to learn from anybody, even a 7-year-old can teach you something important. And from time-to-time tell those who helped you, your family, your teachers, your fellow students how much you value what they have done for you, their generosity and inspiration.

Class of 2026: Stay curious. Work hard on things that matter to you. Do not be discouraged by setbacks or by those who underestimate you. And wherever life takes you, encourage others and open doors for those who come after you.

Many things have changed in the 50 years since I was a new graduate, but one thing has not changed: You still only have 24 hours in a day. Use them wisely. **Remember, not everything that demands your attention, deserves it.**

So now, go on and make this world a better place for all of us.

Thank you