Good evening, everyone.

And congratulations to the graduates. I was honored by Dean De Rossi’s invitation to speak to you today. I had a different job when he asked, but I’m delighted still to be able to do this.

Dentistry and medicine have much that we share in common, and the two schools here are working more closely together now than ever before. This is very much because of Dean De Rossi’s initiative towards that collaboration. As health care moves much more toward “population health,” I believe it will be much more important to focus on whole person health, fully including oral health.

Being with you today brings back many memories for me – especially of my med school graduation in 1974 – hard to believe that it was 45 years ago. My wife asked if I can even remember that graduation speech. Turns out that I can, because it was VERY short.

I wish you the very best in whatever lies ahead for you. My career has been one surprising thing after another. May you also have many happy surprises.

I have a few points I want to leave you with today:

First, you should celebrate the value of a first-class health sciences education, at this the best dental school in America.

Because you have been educated and trained here at UNC, with all the superb opportunities across the campus, many of you have been able to learn not only oral health sciences, but about the wider world – of language, culture, history, politics, art and sciences.

And you’ve had the opportunity to grow as a caregiver, researcher, and advocate. UNC is a leader in inter-professional education, which has prepared you and others for a lifetime of work with other health professionals in a team.

And across the years you’ve spent here, you’ve deepened your understanding of yourself, as you’ve benefited from the dental school maturation process.

So, celebrate – today and going forward – the first-class education you’ve had here.

Second, focus on the importance of making a difference. Wherever you land, and whatever you do, make sure you are investing yourself and your talents to the maximum benefit.

I’ve been privileged to do a variety of things – most of them not the traditional work that physicians are expected to do. As I said a moment ago, almost every one of those has been a surprise.
One activity that I fondly recall is the work I did thirty years ago – in 1989. I was the Bush Administration’s lead negotiator with the Congress for what became the Americans with Disabilities Act, the ADA.

I urge you to search widely for how you can make a difference, in your practice, in education, in research, in your community, in public service.

And make sure your difference making is not about making the world safe or comfortable for you, but for others.

So, focus on making a positive difference for those around you.

And third, remember that humility is always in style.

As I said, I was fortunate to work in the administration of President George Herbert Walker Bush, or 41, as he called himself. I worked at the White House and at the CDC in Atlanta, both under him.

He often told the story of how his mother taught him always to beware of self-importance, and to avoid self-aggrandizement. She told him never to use “the big I word,” but always to celebrate the work of the team, of others.

In Luke 12:48, it says “to whom much was given, of him much will be required.” So, as you celebrate your accomplishments today, remember that you’ve been given much, and then, with humility, put it to good use.

As one of my heroes, Robert Kennedy, often said: “Some men see things as they are, and ask why. I dream of things that never were, and ask why not.”

In conclusion – as you go from here, celebrate the value of your first-class education, focus on the importance of making a difference, especially for others, and remember that humility is always in style.

All the best!