One thing I’ve come to love about my new home, the University of Florida, is the sky. It can be bold and blue. It can be mysterious and dark. Looking up at Century Tower and the palm trees in silhouette against the dramatic sky is, for me, a constant metaphor of possibility and promise.

This spring, we moved commencement ceremonies outdoors to Ben Hill Griffin Stadium. We worried about the prospect of the daily rain drenching thousands of graduates, their families, and the president. But for four evenings in a row the sky resolved into stunning shades of orange and blue.
I’d like to think the commencement sky was putting on a special show for the University of Florida. But this sky is telling us something more. It represents far greater horizons for UF than we have seen before. This sky is, for me, a reminder that this great university can climb sunward, and as John G. Magee put in his poem “High Flight,” “join the tumbling mirth of sun-split clouds – and do a hundred things we have not yet dreamed of.”

While Century Tower and our hallowed traditions and missions will always be here, in the foreground, it is time for us to explore a much bigger beyond.

We are accustomed to thinking about our extraordinarily comprehensive academics on one contiguous campus, our athletics, our beloved land-grant mission and our identity in certain, timeworn ways. But as we continue to build UF’s stature as one of the very best public universities in the nation … girded by our remarkable development and progress since our founding more than a century ago … we should re-examine our assumptions and perceptions about who and what we are.
This afternoon I would like to challenge us to think in different ways about this university and its future – unbound as that stunning orange and blue sun-split horizon.

Before I explain my thoughts, I want to act on my belief that every day ought to include a Thanksgiving, and give some serious thanks.

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Thank you, President Emeritus Rhodes, for your warm, wise, and inspirational introduction. I hope you know how much your – and Rosa’s – presence here today mean to Linda and to me.
I thank Dr. Steve Scott and every member of the Board of Trustees for entrusting me with this extraordinary position and for your commitment to UF’s success. I’m grateful to all the members of the Board of Governors, and I thank Chair Mori Hosseini and Chancellor Marshall Criser III for their constant support. I am so pleased that our exemplary former presidents Marshall Criser, John Lombardi, and Bernie Machen are here today. We are indebted to them and UF’s previous leaders for building the strong foundation on which we presently stand.
I want to acknowledge my fellow university and college presidents. I also thank all the elected and appointed officials or their designees who are present, including those from our city, county, the Florida House of Representatives, Florida Senate, Governor’s Office, U.S. House of Representatives and U.S. Senate. You have welcomed me and helped me understand this state … while listening carefully and considering seriously our requests for this university and the dreams they represent for our students and the residents of Florida. Thank you for what you do for higher education in the State of Florida.

No one rises in their career without the support and guidance of generous, and forgiving, colleagues. I’m grateful for the 17 colleagues who journeyed here from Cornell University for this ceremony. I’m moved to have with us Professor Jacob Abraham, my masters and doctoral advisor from more than three decades ago at the University of Illinois.
A great university has many exceptional leaders. I have had the privilege of being welcomed to UF by an incredible team of Department Chairs, Directors, Deans, Vice Presidents, and a Provost, each of whom works tirelessly and selflessly on behalf of our students, faculty, and the university.

Saving the most important thanks for last, I cherish my wife, Linda, for making this long journey with me step-by-step, hand-in-hand. I also thank our four children, daughter-in-law, grandson, my step-mother Gwen Fuchs and my extended family. You have been, and you are, an unending gift. To all my family, welcome to the Gator family.

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My colleagues at other universities often ask me about my early impressions of the University of Florida. I have been moved by how warmly our students have welcomed Linda and me. I have been delighted, but not surprised by their passion, extraordinary ability and academic excellence.

Second, I have been struck by UF’s exceptional progress in raising its stature to one of the world’s great universities – fueled in no small measure by its first-rate faculty.

I wish that all of you could experience our university the way I do daily, as someone who gets to peer in on many enthralling worlds.
You would be incredibly impressed by the variety and depth of the presentations of hundreds of graduate students at Graduate Student Research Day. You would be captivated to learn how our scientists are remaking tropical agriculture for an ever-hungrier globe at the Tropical Research and Education Center in South Florida. You would be inspired by our Innovation Academy students and by the thousands of undergraduate and graduate students pursuing their degrees online. And you would be awed at the reception for the Machen Florida Opportunity Scholars Class of 2015, where hundreds of first-generation graduates, from homes with average family incomes of $18,000, were headed to leading public and private graduate and professional schools, and to extraordinary jobs.
Like me, many of you this year have opened *The New York Times* to find in-depth coverage of UF enterprises, from faculty leadership to digitize the world’s biological museum collections to Professor William Logan’s detective work on the poem *The Red Wheelbarrow*. We read with pride *The Times*’ report that UF is ranked #6 among all national public and private universities in helping low-income students obtain a college degree.

Facts and observations become discoveries and insights when they are connected together. I have been so privileged to join a university that fosters multi-disciplinary collaborations across one large but contiguous campus. We may be home to 16 very different colleges, a major academic health center and a thriving agricultural enterprise. But our true strength arises when we cross over from shared spaces to shared minds.
As Professor Sid Dobrin, chair of the UF English Department, said earlier this week at the celebration of UF’s new supercomputer ... the third most-powerful at any university in the country ... “The future of research resides not in the traditions of disciplinarily defined intellectual cultures ... or the tendentious support of one above others, but in the rich potential of collaboration and cross-disciplinary research among all of this institution’s innovative intellectual work.” That describes UF today and UF even more so tomorrow.

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Remarkably, our great university arose in a little over a century.

So few residents lived in rural Florida in the early 1900s that our first and second presidents here in Gainesville, Andrew Sledd and Albert Murphree, personally recruited students.
I have a brochure from 1911 entitled “Bulletin of the University of Florida.” Those of you who live in Gainesville will be interested to hear its statement that, quote: “The University lies in the extreme western part of the city, a mile from the courthouse.”

It goes on to list the following enticements:

- “Forty-six Faculty and Staff.”
- “No tuition fees for Florida students, except in the College of Law.”
- “Admission without examination to high school graduates.”

It was all true, but things have changed quite a bit since then!

In 1909, we were three buildings and 100 students amid a longleaf pine forest. Less than two decades later, we had six classroom buildings, a cafeteria, the first library, a gymnasium ... and this wonderful University Auditorium.
Our founding mission was liberal and practical education and service to Florida and its citizens, but we quickly broadened that mission. If you look up to the ceiling here in University Auditorium, you’ll see four different gargoyles on the trusses. There is one gargoyle holding a lyre, another a book, a third a gear, and a fourth a football. They were designed to personify the life of the university that remains familiar to us – the arts, scholarship, economic development and athletics.

After President Tigert succeeded President Murphree in 1928, the university strove to go beyond agricultural research and extend its impact past Florida. Our first PhD programs were launched, as was the Bureau of Economic and Business Research. President Tigert started the Institute for Inter-American Affairs, now our signature Center for Latin American Studies.

President Tigert’s words at the Institute’s opening in 1931 remain remarkably relevant:
“It is our hope that Florida may become to our neighbors the symbol of those things that promote peace rather than war, an agency for confidence rather than suspicion, a medium of understanding rather than misunderstanding, a source of friendship rather than friction, a hand-clasp of good will across the seas ...”

J. Hillis Miller, who succeeded President Tigert, is remembered for his efforts to create a medical school. This led, after his death, to the J. Hillis Miller Health Science Center. But he was also a proponent of the arts and humanities – and he cared deeply about the role of higher education in furthering democracy through education, scholarship and civic discussion.

In 1951, at the height of the Red Scare, President Miller gave a speech in which he decried the “mass hysteria” of the moment and urged people to “think honestly” and “speak frankly” despite fears of reprisals.
“Higher education,” President Miller said, “must, by its very nature, provide an antidote to fear and hysteria. Its weapons are scholarship and enlightenment.”

We should remember his words as we struggle to retain our cherished freedoms while responding to our present world’s threats of terrorism.

Subsequent presidents worked to further enhance UF’s development as a research university with an unwavering commitment to undergraduate education. Enrollment doubled during the presidency of J. Wayne Reitz. The university invested in engineering and added numerous new buildings. One of these was the student union, which opened in 1967 and re-opens in a few weeks following a major renovation.
Like the stately live oak trees of this beautiful campus, many more branches have grown outward, and stronger. The emergence of UF as a globally prominent research university is among the many lasting legacies of the more recent presidents: O’Connell, Marston, Criser, Lombardi, Young and Machen.

We are indebted to these leaders for their advancement of scholarship that led to UF’s admission into the AAU ... for many national centers from the McKnight Brain Institute to the Genetics Institute ... for the Preeminence Plan and so much more.
Of course, presidents inspire and support the achievements of others, who are most responsible for the stature and contributions of this university. I credit our loyal alumni, generous donors, and a great many faculty, students and staff who have made this institution better and stronger. I cite the brave African-American students who in 1958 peacefully brought integration to UF with the admission of George H. Starke to our College of Law. I think of the Cuban students who entered UF during the 1960s after their families fled to Florida from communist-torn Cuba. All of these students set a timeless example of fidelity to our founding ideals of equality and opportunity. They, and others who followed, have made this university a richer and better place.

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Buttressed by the strength and success of the past, we are poised for the future. Our State of Florida for the first time ranks among the top three in population, and our aspirations for our state and the universities and colleges across this state have never been higher.

The University of Florida has been remarkable in helping to spark Florida’s transformation from the least-populated state in the American South ... to an agricultural powerhouse ... to a ternary economy adding real estate and tourism ... to today’s increasingly diversified knowledge-based economy.
Now, we’re driving Florida’s economic development with a rapidly growing research enterprise, fueled by the intellect and creativity of our faculty and students, and with a focus on innovation that permeates the entire University of Florida community. This is demonstrated by the latest rankings from the Association of University Technology Managers that once again put UF among the top-ten private and public universities in commercializing discoveries.

As we enable Florida’s transformation, so we are committed to having an equally profound influence nationally and globally. In working toward this goal ... and in redoubling our commitment to rising among the world’s very best universities ... I propose that one of our most important steps is to reexamine and rethink our assumptions about ourselves.
First, the national awareness of UF’s excellence in athletics is sometimes stronger than awareness of our excellence in academics. I challenge us to think of a University of Florida that has the same acclaim in academics as athletics and that the nation looks to for leadership in both areas.

I am inspired and motivated by the fierce Gator head symbol during athletic events, just as I treasure the sense of comradery that I get from being a part of The Gator Nation. The Gator logo is one of the most recognized symbols in all athletics, collegiate or professional.

My vision is that our academic preeminence will be as broadly recognized and celebrated as our Gator athletics and that both will enhance the reputation and reality of the other.
We will proclaim to the world that just as Florida varsity teams have won national titles in 13 different sports ... and UF has captured 17 national championships since 2006, more than any other university in the nation ... so too we have top-ranked programs in each of our 16 colleges, numerous National Academy members, and more than $700 million in annual research.

As the Ancient Greeks understood, the life of the mind and body share many of the best human qualities, the ones we nurture in our students: drive, focus, energy, teamwork, strategy, creativity, imagination, innovation, and even grace.

These qualities are vital in the classroom, on the field, in scholarship, in careers and in living a full and fulfilled life.

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Next, we sometimes associate our land-grant mission exclusively with our agricultural origins. We often think of the land-grant mission as the sole domain of our beloved IFAS. It’s time, I believe, for UF to be known as a leader in embracing a comprehensive land-grant mission across all its colleges that reshapes both rural and urban settings, helping a population headed toward 8 billion cope with the demands of living on a planet with finite resources.

We will continue to invest in and enhance our impact on Florida’s incredible agriculture industry, from farming to forestry. But just as our 13 research and education centers and extension facilities in all 67 counties are supporting robust agriculture and healthy and resilient cities, so our 16 colleges share in the land-grant mission, both rural and urban. From engineering to medicine to the arts and humanities, we will expand our reach and impact on society throughout an urbanizing state and world.
Third, we have rightfully taken pride in being a premier university for Florida’s best and brightest students and should continue to do so. But we can also become a leading university for students globally, topping the wish lists of superior applicants from Miami to Mumbai and Tampa to Tokyo, and preparing them for careers anywhere in the world.

Historically, only seven percent of our undergraduates come from outside Florida. This puts our students at a disadvantage with students at more global universities, who have more opportunities to build networks with peers whose ambitions are joined to their passports.

We will continue to rise as the destination of choice for the best high school students from anywhere and everywhere. Our students and our state will benefit from having a university that is both a magnet for, and a maker of, global thinkers and leaders.
Fourth, too often, we have allowed our ambitions to be constrained by what we lack rather than what we have.

The story we sometimes tell ourselves is that we would cross over into greatness if only we had more resources ... if only we would get full credit for our accomplishments ... if only we had a larger airport.

We need to rethink this story. After all, we already are global leaders. Also, with the steadfast and bold commitment of our friends, students, faculty, and state, we will secure the necessary resources. Equally important, we have a roadmap in the goals developed with the university wide goal-setting task force this fall.

These goals encompass our people, including our faculty, students, staff and alumni. They encompass our programs, including education, scholarship, and impact on society. They include our infrastructure, and they address our revenues.
As our colleges work on transforming these goals into action, we will devote ourselves to being a premier university that the state, nation, and world looks to for leadership. We will be among the nation’s top-five public research universities. And, we will be the nation’s number one public university for comprehensive excellence, from art to agriculture, business to biology, law to literature, nursing to nanosciences, and from philosophy to pharmacy.

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Everything about our history suggests that our university is capable of such achievement. But to get there, we must challenge ourselves. We must stress the shared prominence and preeminence of academics and athletics ... extend and expand our land-grant mission ... become the university of choice for the best students from around the world ... and refuse to dwell on our limitations while pursuing the goals we have developed.
I am confident the University of Florida will climb sunward and traverse, to borrow another phrase from Magee, “the high trespassed sanctity of space...and touch the face of God”.

We’ve all seen that big sky, with Century Tower in the foreground. Together, let’s go forth to explore that burnished orange and blue horizon beyond. Thank you.