Thank you. I am honored to be sharing this day with you and humbled by the task of perhaps making this memorable day more meaningful, or this meaningful day more memorable, whichever you like.

When I sat down to write, I thought back to my own graduation, in 1991, (you are welcome do the math, I will not do it for you)…and I thought about the words of wisdom from that day

… And I couldn’t remember a single thing. I remember that the master of our college mispronounced my roommate’s name. I remember that I cried saying goodbye to friends and my mascara smudged, or maybe I remember that because there’s a photo that documented that lovely detail. But I do not remember the commencement speech, or even who the speaker was – someone, possibly someone very important, who surely put hours into his … or her … speech and undoubtedly left quite happy about having made a mark on America’s young people.

And actually, this gave me a degree of comfort in preparing my remarks today.

It also made it easy for me to decide what I wanted to say to all of you today. We all know that this traditionally been a day to celebrate being done with learning and planning, and to embark upon the “doing” part. This is when we take our hard-earned skills and go out into the world, putting them to meaningful use according to our plans.

I’m certain that the people in this crowd realize how wrong … and dangerous … this is.

But let me make the case for why it is critically important that you completely dismantle this construct and replace it with something more appropriate to the challenges of our times.

While our individual lives may not always go exactly according to plan, what I am warning against most is the illusion that we can learn what we need to learn, then plan based on what we’ve learned, and then execute to that plan.

So little that is remarkable in our world today came about in such an orderly fashion.

Consider one of the miracles of modern society…and by miracle, I mean something that many people consider simply should not work, the way the bumblebee is not really supposed to be able to fly.

I’m talking about Wikipedia, which shouldn’t be as accurate, timely and comprehensive as it is, given that is written and edited by amateurs with other jobs. But the fact that it is not a professional endeavor is not my point. Did you know that it started out as something called NuPedia? Its special sauce was the process they designed, a way to rigorously research, develop and fact-check the articles, before they were published.

It was to be written by only the top experts in the field, and when it launched, it went according to plan. Until the leaders realized that they were only publishing about 12 articles a year. But one of the staffers had heard about something called a wiki, which is really just a webpage anyone can edit, and thought that they could try using it here.
So co-founder Jimmy Wales and others decided to try opening up the process and letting anyone who wanted to contribute. Now Wikipedia contains over 4.5M articles in English alone and is updated millions of times a day. One of them probably even contains the name of my commencement speaker…

The lesson here was summarized perfectly by Clay Shirky, who has written a number of fantastic books about how the Internet affects society. Clay said:

“It doesn’t matter what you do first. It matters what you do next.”

Trying something, especially if you can try that something that is low-cost and low-risk at a small scale, and then obsessively learning what your experiment is trying to tell you, is how most of the successful consumer Internet companies were built.

And the reason metaphysical Silicon Valley appears to be so successful isn’t that programmers are smarter than the rest of us. It’s that for every successful product or company, there are dozens that didn’t make it. Instead they learned quickly what didn’t work and moved on to a new angle or a new mission. It’s the famous Thomas Edison line in action: “I haven’t failed. I’ve just learned 10,000 ways that don’t work.”

This idea is important to me for two reasons. First, I believe that some of the greatest gains we have to make as a society can come from practicing this approach, not just in new endeavors, but within the largest institution in our country – the one designed to serve not its “customers,” but every citizen of this nation.

I’m talking about our government.

I believe government can do this, is doing this, and needs to do it more for the sake of those it serves.

But the second reason is that when you commit to the “try and learn” approach, it forces you to focus on one thing: The person or people you are trying to help.

In the tech world, we call this person the user, and the business term is the customer, but you might as easily say the patient, or the student, the defendant, or the citizen, depending on the context.

But what we are really talking about here is simply caring about what we put other people through.

Whether it’s the experience in a doctor’s waiting room or applying for financial aid, it’s privileging the needs of human beings over the needs of the institution or company addressing those needs.
It’s fundamentally about showing respect for each other by constantly listening to those we serve and learning what works for them. It’s about always thinking about what to do next to make it a little bit better.

Last year, two teams of fellows at Code for America worked with the City and County of San Francisco to understand what it’s like to enroll in CalFresh, the state’s nutrition assistance program.

As you would expect, they interviewed people enrolled in the program, but more importantly, they enrolled themselves.

The fellows didn’t qualify for the program, so a few of them got permission to enroll but not actually spend the money. Once they were enrolled, they started getting notices in the mail, a lot of notices, notices that made little sense to them, in language they didn’t understand, often written in all capitals… Good way to leave a ransom note, but it’s a bad way to communicate.

The fellows found that they were dropped from the program several times because they had failed to comply in some way, despite doing their best to respond to each of the notices. Each time, they reenrolled, and throughout the process, they tried to imagine how difficult this would be if you didn’t get your mail regularly, if you didn’t have time to carefully read each notice.

They heard from the people they interviewed what it’s like to be at the front of the line at the grocery store, your purchases bagged, and find out that your CalFresh card doesn’t work.

Hunger meets humiliation at checkout stands across our country every day, because our system communicates in a language designed for institutions instead of for humans.

So the team tried a couple of experiments.

First, they looked at ways of changing the forms, which turned out to be really hard. They tried creating a website that explained the notices people were getting, but no one visited it. And then the team did a small thing: they built a way for the CalFresh program to send recipients a text message that simply said: “Your CalFresh benefits may stop at the end of this month. Questions? Call us.”

They tried different ways of wording this and tracked which ones resulted in more interventions, and found over time how to keep thousands of people from having that terrible moment at the checkout stand. Each step of the way, they focused on what to do next to make the experience a little better.

This team did not follow a set plan. In fact, they started out thinking they would work on a system to make the assignment of beds in homeless shelters easier. Instead of following the plan, they followed the needs of their users and found a place where they could make a difference.

They iterated and evolved.
There is a narrative about power in our society in this age….As we have moved from an industrial society to an information society to a networked society, we can all feel that power structures shift and change. Opportunities open up. Opportunities for the consolidation of power, but also opportunities to make the world around us reflect our values a little better.

Here’s how I see it: There used to be planners and strategists and masterminds at the top, and people who execute those plans, or serve the customers, or do the actual work at the bottom, and a whole lot of handoffs in between.

The word for it in the tech world is waterfall, because the plans get handed down through layers of process.

But the world has changed and the planners haven’t gotten the memo yet. To quote Clay Shirky again,

“The waterfall method amounts to a pledge by all parties not to learn anything while doing the actual work.”

And we saw how devastating the consequences of this can be, when healthcare.gov launched last year.

But the day the world realized the site didn’t work for its users, some of the most intense, even heroic learning began. Learning that was so successful that the same team that shipped a failure on October first (plus a few dozen additions), managed to enroll 8 million people in health insurance by April 15th, a million more than the highest estimates.

How did they do it? One way was by getting some of the best technical and design talent in the world to come out to DC, join the existing team, and help fix the site. They stopped looking at their plans and org charts and they started listening to the users, to the people who needed coverage and had to navigate the site to get it. They listened to the data those users left and monitored it obsessively.

This team dropped everything in their lives and worked in some cases 120 days straight, 18 hours a day to fix the site.

Why would they do that? I have talked with most of them and the universally common answers are: They did it because they wanted their fellow Americans to have access to healthcare, and because they are doers.

So, planning up top, doing at the bottom, and a long string of handoffs in between: That is the Past.

The future is doing, learning and doing again, keeping what works and editing what doesn’t, all the while listening to real human beings with real needs, trying to make their experience a little bit better every day.
The future is policy, planning, implementation and service in a dynamic, ongoing conversation.

So when you leave here, forget about the job title you’re handed, and make it your job to disrupt the deadly waterfall and create instead a swirl. Make it your job to be the voice of the user, to speak for the needs of the people you serve, because if you don’t, who will?

And speaking of job titles, may I suggest one? How about Founder? I live half time in the world of tech startups, where there is a cult of the founder. But my heart is in the world of public service, where people understand that at its core, government is simply what we do together, and here, when we say founder, we mean the founders of our country.

The thing about founders – of companies or countries – is that they don’t have just one job; they have all jobs, and their number one job is to speak for the user, or perhaps, to speak for the people.

Company founders and the founders of our nation have another thing in common. Jack Dorsey, a founder of two companies himself, said it well:

“The founders of our nation had a lot of good ideas
But they had one really great idea
A more perfect union
And the realization that they weren’t going to get everything right the first time around
because the work is unfinished
open to the future
open to change
open to evolution
that there is not one founding moment, but many in fact many.”

I believe we are at one of those founding moments, a moment when we realign our values with how we run our businesses and institutions.

If you remember nothing else from today – and I say this with full knowledge of my own track record in remembering – but if it is all a blur a week from now, remember this:

The opportunity for you today is to be a founder of something that matters to your fellow humans, by continually listening to each other, constantly iterating, and making planning, learning and doing as dependent on each other as we human beings are dependent on each other.

Or just remember: it matters what you do next.

Thank you, and congratulations.