

I want to welcome you to the commencement ceremony.

As we start our ceremony, I would like to ask you, our graduates, to stand up and remain standing if you are a first-generation college student. Please stand up if you are a mother. Please stand up if you are a father. Please stand up if you are active-duty military. Please stand up if you are a veteran. Please stand up if you are in a military family. Please stand up if you are in the public service community. Please stand up if you are a working student. And please stand up if you are a student from outside of the United States. Now, look around at your fellow community of students, and the many walks of life that surround us. Welcome all. We are extremely proud of you.

Now, please remain standing, and I would like to invite spouses, partners, loved ones, parents, children, and friends of the graduates to please rise. Now, graduates, please turn around to recognize and applaud these dear friends and family members and thank them for the support given to you through your academic journey. You're amazing. You may be seated now. Thank you.

What an extraordinary moment this is for all of you who worked so hard to reach this milestone. And for those who supported you every step of the way. I want to begin by offering my sincere congratulations. And today, we celebrate your achievement, but also, your resilience, your commitment, and your courage to keep going when things got hard. And today, you can proudly say, "I did it!"

As I reflect on what message I could possibly leave you on a day like this, I think back to the village where I grew up, on the other side of the world, in a smaller country than Florida. Fewer than 200 people lived in that village. No cars. A place where time moves slowly, and values run deep. I lived with my grandparents, who are humble, spiritual people. And life was simple, not by design, but by necessity. And yet, it was there that I learned what happiness really means.

Happiness, I discovered, came from moments that didn't cost money. Walking through the forest with my grandfather to find the perfect pine for the Christmas decorations, riding along the beach with my friends, or going to church with my grandmother, just so she would buy me my favorite ice cream afterwards. These memories didn't come from wealth or ambition, they came from presence, from purpose, and from love.

Years later, when my son was born, I felt the kind of happiness and clarity that reshaped everything. In that moment, I realized how much of my energy had gone into things that didn't really matter. My world shifted from being centered on me, to being centered on him. In that shift, I found strength, ambition with purpose, and a deeper, much deeper, version of myself.

Many of you are about to embark on your own shifts, new jobs, new cities, new responsibilities, and hopefully, even bigger families. You'll be pushed, you'll be stretched, and sometimes you'll be shaken. But let me offer you a simple rule that I believe is the most important one I can give you. And that rule is simple, it's: take care of yourself. And I don't say these in a selfish or narcissistic way, but in the foundational one.

From the Latin words, almost as old as Western civilization itself: “Mens sana in corpore sano;” a healthy mind, in a healthy body. When you are mentally or physically well, you become a better teammate, a better leader, a better friend, and a better parent. You show up fully, and lift up those around you.

Self-care isn't just about physical health. It's about spiritual alignment. And by that, I don't mean religion specifically. I mean finding a deep purpose in life and understanding that we are always being pulled by two forces: One force that elevates us, and one force that diminishes us. Call it good or evil, light and darkness, the higher road or the easier one. It's always there.

So, I encourage you to always have the clarity and strength to choose what's good, what's right, again and again, even, and especially, when it's hard. That's where real happiness comes from. Not from comfort, but from knowing you chose integrity, that you showed up for others. That you took care of your family and protected them. That you had the backs of your friends. That you stayed true to your deepest values, because character is what you do when no one else is watching. Never forget that.

The butterfly effect teaches us that even the smallest decisions can shape your entire life. The conversation. A glance at a job board. A decision to go left instead of going right. Most of the big things in my life, my career, my move to a new country, even the birth of my son, can be traced back to small moments that didn't seem significant at the time. So, don't underestimate the power of your choices, big and small.

And don't waste energy worrying. Worry is not strategy. Worry clouds judgment and steals today's moments. Instead, approach problems like puzzles. Be curious. Be excited to solve them. And surround yourself with people who run toward challenges.

And above all, above all. Always be kind. As Maya Angelou famously said, “People will forget what you said, they will forget what you did, but they will never forget how you made them feel.” Lead with empathy. Care about people, not in a performative way, but in a real human way. Whether you're leading a company, raising a child, or helping a neighbor, you have the power to elevate others through how you make them feel.

So, let me leave you with this: The odds of you being here today, just as you are, are close to zero. The odds of this group sitting in this room together, are nearly a cosmic coincidence. So, what do we do with this miracle? We make the most of it. We take care of ourselves. We support each other. We stay grounded in our values. And we lead with courage and compassion.

Congratulations, Class of 2025. You are not just graduating; you are stepping into a world that needs your light. And I, for one, am incredibly excited to see where you go next.

Thank you for choosing American Military University and American Public University for your education. We are deeply humbled to have been just a small part of your world while we work to achieve a goal. Now that you've made it, may you walk forward with strength, purpose, and gratitude. Once again, welcome to your commencement ceremony.

This is where it all begins. Thank you.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Ann Fuchs", with a stylized, cursive script.