As we adapt to a rapidly changing world, we must build anew on Harvard’s long traditions of liberal-arts education and of humanistic inquiry. These traditions can generate both the self-scrutiny and self-understanding that lead through doubt to wisdom.

Universities as engines of opportunity; universities as the principal sites of America’s scientific research; universities as truth tellers: these are three fundamental aspects of our understanding of ourselves. Yet each faces challenges in the new era that lies ahead of us—challenges of structures, of affordability, and of values. And we are challenged in turn to demonstrate our commitment to these principles, which have so long been at the heart of who we have defined ourselves. We must not take these principles for granted, and we must not lose sight of them as we make the many choices about what to keep and what to forgo in the months ahead. But we must devise new ways of sustaining them for changed times. We are accountable to and for these traditions and the values they represent—the belief that the open and unfettered pursuit of truth will build a better world for us all. This is what inspires all that we do and all that we are—for now and in the years to come.

“Days With the Family Realist”
by Phi Beta Kappa poet Albert Goldbarth

A doorknob on a chicken
my grandmother said once, meaning
useless, stupid. Most of us,
most of the time, are that
exactly. Not that
we don’t have our ambitions,
even our nickel-and-dime
nobilities. Still, some nights
when I can’t sleep, I look
in the mirror, I study this man
who’s planning his own small
parthenons and relativity theories,
bank heists, moon shots, deathless poems.
Go milk a fish she also said.

“Days With the Family Realist”
by Phi Beta Kappa poet Albert Goldbarth

“A Passion and a Voice”

Toward the end of his afternoon address, U.S. Secretary of Energy Steven Chu enlisted help from the new graduates—as intellectual leaders, scientists and engineers, policymakers, and business leaders—in building a sustainable energy future. He concluded:

Finally, as humanists, I ask that you speak to our common humanity. One of the cruelest ironies about climate change is that the ones who will be hurt the most are the most innocent: the world’s poorest and those yet to be born.

The coda to this last movement is borrowed from two humanists.
The first quote is from Martin Luther King when he spoke on ending the war in Vietnam in 1967, but his message seems so fitting for today’s climate crisis:

This call for worldwide fellowship that lifts neighborly concern beyond one’s tribe, race, class, and nation is in reality a call for an all-embracing and unconditional love for all mankind. This oft misunderstood, this oft misinterpreted concept, so readily dismissed by the Nietzscheans of the world as a weak and cowardly force, has now become an absolute necessity for the survival of man... We are now faced with the fact, my friends, that tomorrow is today. We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now. In this unfolding conundrum of life and history, there is such a thing as being too late.

The final message is from William Faulkner. On December 10, 1950, his Nobel Prize banquet speech was about the role of humanists in a world facing potential nuclear holocaust:

I believe that man will not merely endure: he will prevail. He is immortal, not because he alone among creatures has an inexhaustible voice, but because he has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance. The poet’s, the writer’s, duty is to write about these things. It is his privilege to help man endure by lifting his heart, by reminding him of the courage and honor and hope and pride and compassion and pity and sacrifice which have been the glory of his past.

Graduates, you have an extraordinary role to play in shaping our future. As you pursue your private passions, I hope you will also develop a passion and a voice to help the world in ways both large and small. Nothing will give you greater satisfaction.

Please accept my warmest congratulations. May you prosper and may you help preserve our planet, for your children and for all the children of the world.