Thank you your honour. I am not the first to observe that we spend more time congratulating people who have succeeded than encouraging people who have their successes ahead of them – which in this instance is all of you, today’s graduands.

Greetings to President Petter, members of the board of governors, members of senate, visiting scholars, faculty, staff, parents, family and friends. What a pleasure it is to share this event, this launch into our new selves. And what a very great honour to become your university’s 11th Chancellor and to be able to participate in a day so imbued with meaning for each of us.

In 1980 – an impossibly long time ago, I know – I was in your chair, in your cap and gown – who knows, perhaps the very ones you are wearing now – how long do these gowns last anyway? – having completed a degree in economics. In the thirty-four years since, I have tried to do what I hope you will do. I took my education, my health, my energies, my interests and my beliefs, and engaged in occupations and activities that have filled my life with meaning.

I have worked, written, volunteered, married my wonderful husband Tony, raised three remarkable young people to early adulthood, sustained friendships, spent time on my feet, my bicycle and my yoga mat, read, volunteered, debated, travelled, got lost, got bored, got discouraged, lost a few battles, attained some of my goals, missed others, dreamed up new ones, took up new causes and new work and, best of all, made many new friends.

One of my passions is universities – particularly this one – and the way universities fearlessly advance knowledge. That particular passion has brought me here – a chancellor with her training wheels still on. Along the way I have learned that you don’t have to be or do just one thing; we all contain multitudes.

People often tell me I seem to lead a full life. I hope they don’t mean that I lead a busy one. Busy-ness will certainly befall you. We live in a busy, multi-tasking world. But busy isn’t what we should strive for. It is possible to live a full life without falling prey to being busy at every moment and every hour.

What does it mean to live fully? First, it means engaging with ideas. Ideas are at the root of a good life, a life well-lived. SFU has given you the tools you need to do this. The fact of your graduating means you have the ability to read widely, to seek out the more challenging sources of information, to listen with care to the views of others, to shape your own views, and, I hope, to have, for your entire life, the ability to change your mind. As the economist John Maynard Keynes said: “When my information changes, I alter my conclusions. What do you do, sir?”
Each of us has at our core a unique set of ideas, and it is in exploring and acting on those ideas – the ones that drive the blood through our own personal veins, hearts, minds and limbs – that we come to lead a uniquely satisfying life. Living a full life also means taking opportunities. Anyone can tell you to say no. I argue in favour of saying yes. Not saying yes to stupid things. But I do suggest you make a habit of saying yes to some semi-stupid ones.

For example, a number of years ago I said “yes” to writing a weekly column in the National Post. I didn’t know how to do it. I figured I would work it out as I went along. A lot of what we come to know, we learn from trying, failing, trying again, succeeding a little and so on. When I wrote for the National Post, I would get letters when I got it wrong – It was the era of letters – remember them? You should have read what people said when I published a column called “Is Toronto necessary?” Most of them were from Toronto.

On the other hand, I received wonderful letters when I got something right. I wrote once about a clearly damaged woman, who’d had her children taken away. Observing me interacting with my children in the grocery aisle one day, she spoke to me about motherhood, from a perspective of great loss and sorrow. I wrote a column about her a week later. It was printed on Mother’s Day. Hers was not a perspective that gets aired very often and it reached an audience through that column.

On another occasion, and in a similar way, I said yes to becoming president of a company that makes lumber and pulp. (When you think of it, maybe they were even braver when they said yes to me.) So, remember to say yes.

Living a full life also means engaging – deeply engaging – with actual, messy, demanding, complicated, challenging, wrong-headed people. Like the guy on your left. Or the woman in front of you. Existence requires coexistence. There is simply no way around it.

Finally, living a full life means taking action. It’s what we do that matters. Being is never neutral. Our actions have meaning and our lives end up having the meaning that our actions provide. Your SFU education sets you up to live very full lives indeed. No matter what happens in life you will always have each other, this band, this tribe of SFU people. Stay in touch. Be proud of where you came from.

As for me, I will be watching you. I will be rooting for you. From time to time I may even pray for you. Anne Lamott says there are three essential prayers. “Help.” You may recall saying or thinking this one just before your exams. “Thank you.” There are many reasons in life to say thank you. The third prayer is “Wow.” Just wow.

Standing here today, as your Chancellor, I am fully, completely, prepared to be wowed by all of you. Thank you.