Commence Operations
The highs and lows of graduation speeches, from journalist Judy Woodruff

Who was your graduation speaker at Duke University?
Barnes Woodhall, who was the associate provost at Duke University at the time.

Any bits of wisdom from that speech that stuck with you?
No, unfortunately. In those days, there was not a compulsion to ask celebrities like Oprah Winfrey, who speaks at this year’s commencement!

You gave a speech at Notre Dame in 2007 titled “Is Journalism Obsolete?” Is it?
No, but we are closer to that slippery slope than we were when I gave that speech. There is still great journalism being practiced in this country, despite the economic meltdown and a technology revolution that has up-ended the traditional ways news is covered and reported.

You were also once a White House correspondent. If you could ask President Obama one question today, what would it be?
What is the one problem facing the nation you think is most important for the American people to be prepared to change their thinking on in order for you to accomplish what you want to as president?

How do you think the class of 2009 will influence politics?
They will demand more transparency and less partisanship from elected officials.

How is being a commencement speaker different from being a broadcaster?
A commencement speaker should bring a message that connects his or her own experiences to the graduates and the lives they face, and ideally, inspires them. A news broadcaster’s job is to report the news, to tell the audience what is going on that is important, whether it is inspirational or not.

What’s tougher: interviewing politicians or speaking to a group of college graduates?
Depends on the politician. Eliciting useful information from a lawmaker with experience at avoiding questions can be pretty challenging. But speaking to college graduates at their commencement carries a huge responsibility. It’s a big day in their lives, and the speech should be thoughtful and tailored to them.

How has college life changed since you were a student?
It’s more competitive, and the Internet, cell phones, and iPods have revolutionized studying and relationships. But I don’t think it’s more fun—we still knew how to have fun back in the ’60s!

How important do you think higher education is for students today?
More important than ever, especially in this global economy. Whether it is vocational training, a community college, or a four-year school, education is the main key to a productive and fulfilling life.