Former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe Commencement Address

Ladies and gentlemen, let me introduce myself. My name is Abe Shinzo. All the students who are graduating from the university today, congratulations! Please be seated. Excuse me. Parents and families who are viewing this ceremony online, and all related parties, congratulations to you all! I believe that up till today you have been doing various chores for the graduating students. Taking them to and from kindergarten or the daycare center, making their lunches, praising them at times and scolding them at other times... You may have had difficult times battling with them. All your efforts are rewarded today, on this day of their graduation ceremony. Your children are leaving the campus to serve our society as working members. Once again, I’d like to express my hearty congratulations.

By the way, I believe you have just heard my humble piano performance. You may have thought I was performing a party trick. Well, it is a kind of party trick. In fact, it was longer, but it was cut much shorter. Last year marked the 10th anniversary of the Great East Japan Earthquake and tsunami. There was a memorial concert in October. This piece of music, titled “Flowers will bloom,” has been sung to encourage people who have lost family members in the disaster. Many people have sung this song repeatedly. A friend of mine, who was a victim of the disaster, thought that at the memorial concert, this piece should be played by an amateur pianist. So thinking, he asked me to play the piano. It is my motto that I don’t decline requests for help. Since this is my principle, I accepted his offer. Indeed, I am a complete amateur pianist. Urged on by my mother, I began piano lessons when I entered elementary school. When I finished the standard elementary program, using an instruction book by Beyer, my father said: “It seems Shinzo doesn’t have a talent for the piano. It’s probably time to end his lessons.” And so, I stopped practicing the piano. Since then, I didn’t even touch the piano. Then, for the first time in almost 60 years, I began to practice the piano. Although I was busy, I practiced it hard every night after work, until late at night. How was my performance? I admit that I have somewhat forced your applause. On the day of the concert, however, a general election was held. So, I was unable to perform on the stage and sent a video instead. On the day of the filming, when I was playing the piano, I remembered various scenes of the day of the disaster.

Many people had lost their families and friends in the tsunami. Amid such a desperate situation, many people were suffering tremendously. To help the victims, what could I do as a man and as a politician? After discussing the matter, Chairman Seko and I decided to collect relief supplies and deliver them to the victims ourselves. On March 26, 2011, that is, 11 years ago, we collected goods that were desired by people in shelters in the affected areas and loaded them on two trucks. It was the day when Tohoku Expressway reopened for private vehicles. On that day, we went to Fukushima. The trucks were prepared by Mr. Suma Tokuhiro, the president of a shipping company. He is an alumnus of Kindai University. He worked so hard! From six o’clock in the morning, till two o’ clock the next morning, he continued driving all the way by himself. Mr. Suma, thank you very much. In an affected area, I saw members of the Self-Defense Forces, fire stations, the police, local government staff, and volunteers. Together with these people, victims were engaged in searching for missing people and managing the shelters. They were working in silence while holding back their tears. On the next day, we reached another town at a late hour. There I saw a chief of a fishermen’s union. “Mr. Abe, a warm welcome to you. Thank you for coming.” In this way, he welcomed me cheerfully. Then, he said: “This morning, I finally observed my wife’s funeral service. I shall not be defeated. We will revive this town by all means. Mr. Abe, I wish you good luck, too.” I felt overwhelmed by his vitality and courage.

Four years before then, the first Abe administration came to an end only one year after its inauguration. As you may know, I have a chronic disease, ulcerative colitis, which is an intractable disease. Because of my lack of experience and poor ability to manage the cabinet, I experienced a crushing defeat in the general election. This led my regime to a deadlock and the worsening of my chronic disease. As a result, I was obliged to resign as prime minister shortly after reshuffling my cabinet. I was severely criticized by people across the country for having thrown out the regime. It was all my responsibility. My pride and confidence as a politician were crushed. Everybody thought that Abe Shinzo’s career as a politician was ended. Later, a new medicine was developed, which cured my disease. However, I did not regain the confidence to exert my leadership as a politician. On such occasion, I saw victims of the earthquake and tsunami, who were striving to revive their hometowns. I realized it was my mission to restore a strong economy to revive their hometowns. With this resolution, I ran for the presidency of the Liberal Democratic Party. I managed to win in the election and regained political power.

Why was I able to become prime minister again, which had been regarded as impossible? It wasn’t because I was an exceptional person. Unfortunately, I didn’t have an outstanding ability. It was not because I was particularly strong, either. It was simply because I didn’t give up, and because I was encouraged to never give up. “If you think it’s impossible, you can never step forward.” “You have countless options and possibilities as boundless as the sea.” “If you feel you can do it, you have nearly achieved your goal.” This is a song written by Tsunku♂. He wrote this song for Kindai University. From the song, I quoted my favorite phrases. It’s important to never give up. It’s important to have confidence in your own ability. My first administration ended in just one year, and I was criticized for having stepped down too quickly. With my second administration, however, my term as Japanese prime minister became the longest in the history of the Japanese constitutional government. As I have stated, I wasn’t an exceptional leader. I was supported by exceptional colleagues. Chairman Seko is one of such colleagues. I was able to sustain my government because I had good colleagues who stepped forward with me by aligning their efforts with mine. Many of these colleagues experienced failures and setbacks during the first Abe administration. I shared with them frustrations and bitter regrets. Later, this experience proved to be helpful.

In your life, I’m sure you will experience failures. Some of you may fail again and again. What is important is to rise up again. If you learn from your own mistakes, you’ll become greater. Walt Disney was once fired by his company. Although he had started up his own business, it went bankrupt. After repeated bankruptcies, benefiting from these experiences, he finally achieved great success. American society provides people with ample opportunities to rise up again. I have been striving to transform Japanese society. Probably, our society hasn’t yet changed enough. To change it into a society that allows people to take on challenges, however, it needs someone who takes on challenges.

This is why I have great expectations of you. Looking back over four years at university, you have had to endure many restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic. You couldn’t come to the campus very often. You couldn’t go back to your hometown or meet your family very often. You had only a few hours to spend with your friends. You had few opportunities to foster friendships. I believe you have experienced many hardships. However, you are here today to celebrate your graduation after overcoming all these difficulties. I believe the hardships you have experienced will benefit you in the future. I truly believe so. By spending this difficult time at the same university, you have built strong ties with your classmates. These are exceptional ties. The friendships you have fostered here will remain invaluable assets throughout your life.

Eleven years ago, Chairman Seko and I saw the impacts of the great tsunami, engulfing bridges, streets and buildings, and washing away houses, vehicles and people. The tsunami deprived many people of their peaceful, normal daily lives. It was beyond our imagination. Amid this calamity, people kept their heads up, helping each other and behaving decently. Their behavior surprised the world. At summit meetings that I participated in, many world leaders praised the behavior of the Japanese people. I hope you will be proud of this fact and have confidence in yourself. Eleven years ago, on March 11, 2011, some people kept calling for evacuations, wielding a microphone, or shouting themselves hoarse, to save as many lives as possible. These people fulfilled their tasks at the cost of their own lives. After the disaster, I saw many volunteers clearing the rubble and debris. They are the people who have protected and will protect our society.

When I have discussions with young people, I am often surprised to know that many of them hope to contribute to their communities, to Japan, and to the world. They have made me embrace great expectations for young people. My young friends, I urge you to take on challenges, and if you fail, rise up again. Combine your power and vitality to make the world better. Congratulations on your graduation once again. Thank you for your kind attention.