

That realization may be kind of intimidating. But I hope it's also inspiring. With all the challenges this country faces right now, nobody can tell you "no, you're too young to understand" or "this is how it's always been done." Because with so much uncertainty, with everything suddenly up for grabs, this is your generation's world to shape.

Since I'm one of the old guys, I won't tell you what to do with this power that rests in your hands. But I'll leave you with three quick pieces of advice.

First, don't be afraid. America's gone through tough times before – slavery, civil war, famine, disease, the Great Depression and 9/11. And each time we came out stronger, usually because a new generation—young people like you—learned from past mistakes and figured out how to make things better.

Second, do what you think is right. Doing what feels good, what's convenient, what's easy – that's how little kids think. Unfortunately, a lot of so-called grown-ups, including some with fancy titles and important jobs, still think that way – which is why things are so screwed up. I hope that instead, you decide to ground yourself in values that last, like honesty, hard work, responsibility, fairness, generosity, respect for others. You won't get it right every time, you'll make mistakes like we all do. But if you listen to the truth that's inside yourself, even when it's hard, even when it's inconvenient, people will notice. They'll gravitate towards you. And you'll be part of the solution instead of part of the problem.

Finally, build a community. No one does big things by themselves. Right now, when people are scared, it's easy to be cynical and say let me just look out for myself, or my family, or people who look or think or pray like me. But if we're going to get through these difficult times; if we're going to create a world where everybody has the opportunity to find a job, and afford college; if we're going to save the environment and defeat future pandemics, then we're going to have to do it together.

To all those who feel different, if you're a part of a group that's called other, a group that does not get the chance to be center stage, build your own stage and make them see you. Your queerness is beautiful. Your blackness is beautiful. Your compassion, your understanding, your fight for people who may be different from you is beautiful. I hope you continue to go into the world and show them that you will never stop being yourself. That it's your time now, make them see you. Now, if you've ever been called dumb, unattractive, overweight, unworthy, untalented, well, so have I. Whatever you do, don't let negativity of people projecting their own self doubts on you, deter you from your focus. I know those moments are painful and you're human and it hurts like hell. But now is the time to turn those criticisms into fuel and motivation to become a beautiful beast.

Respect is everything. There's no successful relationship without respect, nor a successful movement if the basic principle is not respect. The world will respect you as much as you respect yourself. I'm often asked, "What's your secret to success?" The shorter answer, put in that work. There may be more failures than victories. Yes, I've been blessed to have 24 Grammys, but I've lost 46 times. That meant rejection 46 times. Please don't ever feel entitled to win, just keep working harder. Surrender to the cards you are dealt. It's from that surrender that you get your power. Losing can be the best motivator to get you even bigger wins. So never compare yourself to anyone else. There will be wins and losses. There will be tears and laughter. You'll feel the shades of life deeply. Now with success comes challenges. With your wins, you may start to notice people spending a lot of energy trying to tear you down.

Try not to take it personally. Unfortunately, it's something that comes along with success. Whenever you feel like you're not in control or the world is against you, let that vulnerability motivate you into greatness. That's how I found my true self.

What I want to talk to you about today is the difference between gifts and choices. Cleverness is a gift, kindness is a choice. Gifts are easy—they're given after all. Choices can be hard.

This is a group with many gifts. I'm sure one of your gifts is the gift of a smart and capable brain. How will you use these gifts? And will you take pride in your gifts or pride in your choices?

I got the idea to start Amazon 16 years ago. I came across the fact that Web usage was growing at 2,300 percent per year. I'd never seen or heard of anything that grew that fast, and the idea of building an online bookstore with millions of titles was very exciting to me. I had just turned 30 years old, and I'd been married for a year. I told my wife that I wanted to quit my job and go do this crazy thing that probably wouldn't work since most startups don't, and I wasn't sure what would happen after that. She told me I should go for it. I'd always wanted to be an inventor, and she wanted me to follow my passion.

I was working at a financial firm in New York City with a bunch of very smart people, and I had a brilliant boss that I much admired. I went to my boss and told him I wanted to start a company selling books on the Internet. He took me on a long walk in Central Park, listened carefully to me, and finally said, "That sounds like a really good idea, but it would be an even better idea for someone who didn't already have a good job." That logic made some sense to me, and he convinced me to think about it for 48 hours before making a final decision. Seen in that light, it really was a difficult choice, but ultimately, I decided I had to give it a shot. I didn't think I'd regret trying and failing. And I suspected I would always be haunted by a decision to not try at all. After much consideration, I took the less safe path to follow my passion, and I'm proud of that choice.