Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen,

I am a huge fan of the very young and the very old.

The young appreciate the little things in our world – they marvel at dandelions that manage to grow through the tiniest cracks in a sidewalk and the glistening diffraction of light off of bubbles. A child’s attention never lingers long before being torn to the next sight, more exciting and delightful than the last; yet, a child’s instincts are strong, true to self, uninhibited, and often filled with wisdom beyond their years.

The old have long since made their indelible mark on the world and have already seen its many wonders. They know both the highs and the lows that life can bring; the deepest depths of love and loss. For some – like my grandfather, who turns 91 in two weeks – this wisdom, which only experience can endow, has left an insatiable thirst to enjoy every second of every day. He still calls me to discuss how he might improve his tennis game or whether I’d like to meet him for spring skiing. Having both lost and gained much over the years, he continues to face each day unburdened by the prospect of his mortality, with a childlike willingness to take risks.

Indeed, the very young and the very old seem to have figured things out. It is those in between – you and I – for whom I fear. Our worries about finding success or how others might perceive us and our follies cause us to lose the sense of wonderment and frivolity of childhood, and prevent us from reaching the wisdom of old age. We find ourselves building our own barriers, all in the name of the stoic pragmatism that society seems to place on a pedestal. Let’s be honest: how many of us have written the heartfelt application or grant that broke the mold, only to see it denied, while those we wrote following convention were accepted? It’s a dilemma most of us are familiar with. What then are we to do? Throw pragmatism to the wind? Succumb to our own defeat? Of course not. We must temper pragmatism with youthful exuberance, rewriting boundaries and breaking down barriers-to-change – our own, or those of others – whenever necessary.

Joseph Campbell said “the privilege of a lifetime is being who you are.”

I urge you to be yourself, find your fight, and wage that fight passionately and with conscious intent. The obvious reality is that for each of us this fight will be different. Some have notions of “curing cancer” or “eliminating poverty,” while others may simply wish to become a good parent and instill positive values in their children. Find what makes you happy and follow your own path, wherever it may take you.

Every day, I ask myself: who am I? What do I value? And, Why am I doing what I’m doing?

I’ve found that I’m driven by the notion that I might have something unique to bring to the table to improve this hurting world in which we live. I also recognize that it’s not just the big things that we do – often, it is the small things that impact our lives and the lives of others. We’re human, we’re connected – so interact with the world wholeheartedly!

There are so many ways to be agents of change, progress, and good in this world. Look at our mentors: some of them have helped us write applications or design experiments, while others were friendly faces to share stories, life advice, tears. Do not forget them; one day you will be the gatekeeper to another’s future.
And when times get tough, as they undoubtedly will, consider the words of Richard Byrd, an early polar explorer: he said, “Few men (or women) during their lifetime come anywhere near exhausting the resources dwelling within them. There are deep wells of strength that are never used.”

Keep tapping your deepest inner resources. These nominations and awards are betting that we have the potential to be agents for positive change. We must not rest on our laurels – be the change agent that you seek to be, such that one day you grow old and content with your many deeds.

In truth, as I was told by my own mentor, I hope you never achieve your wildest dreams . . . because if you do, then your dreams weren’t wild enough.