

Suffolk University Law School Commencement
Saturday, May 17, 2014
Citi Performing Arts Center-Wang Theatre
Commencement Remarks
U.S. Sen. Edward J. Markey

As Lyndon Johnson once said, my father would have been so proud to have just heard that introduction, and my mother would have actually believed it. So, thank you so much. Dean Nelson, Chairman Meyer, faculty, parents, family, friends, above all, graduates, I honor your achievement here today, and I thank you for this invitation.

Today marks an important milestone on your path towards joining the legal profession. Today is a day of joy. Today is a day of accomplishment. Today is a day to recognize those who helped you reach this point. Your parents, your friends, the faculty at this institution. Each of you is here today because some years ago, you decided that you wanted to become a lawyer. There are many reasons that might have motivated your decision. For some, it's a passion for justice. For others, it's a love for the majesty and the order of the law. The rest of you may be merely longing to spend their days billing clients in six minute increments. Some of you, like me, may have initially been inspired by a stirring tale in a movie or a TV show, or a book. Many years ago, I had a chance to meet the great actor, Gregory Peck. I told him that when I was young, I had seen him play Atticus Finch in the film, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and that it had inspired me so much that I decided to become a lawyer. Mr. Peck nodded slowly and then he said to me, you are the 10,000th young lawyer to come up and tell me that, and frankly, I just don't want the responsibility. So let that be a warning to you. If you ever meet Reese Witherspoon and you feel the urge to tell her that *Legally Blond* inspired you to become an attorney, don't do it. She doesn't want the responsibility.

I am the son of a milkman, who drove a truck for the Hood Milk Company. My mother had to abandon her college dreams when her mother, my grandmother, died. She had to raise the younger sisters in the family. I am the first person in my family to graduate from college. I was a commuter, living at home in Malden, all through college and all through law school. Before I stepped into my first law school class with the first torts professor who came into that classroom, and I had no idea what a tort was, I had never met a lawyer in my life until that professor walked into the classroom. Four years later, I was elected to Congress. And when I flew down to Washington, DC, that was the first time I had ever been in Washington, DC, just four years after graduating from law school. If you look up blind faith in the dictionary, you'll see my face right next to it.

But I do know this, I am here today and you are here today because we have been given the opportunities that were beyond the reach of many in past generations. Something good happened to our families in the 20th century so that we could choose our own paths in the 21st century. Of the six billion people on the planet, most of them would trade places with you right now. And that's not just because you have five parties to go to tonight. They would trade places with you because you are one-half of one-half of one percent of the most privileged people who have ever lived in the history of the planet, now that you have a Suffolk law degree. The collective power of the new Suffolk Law lawyers is awesome. Amazing things are going to be achieved by the people who are sitting here this afternoon.

If you look around the world today, you will see the power of your education. Look to Nigeria where militants have kidnapped hundreds of girls because they dared to go to school. Or Pakistan, where the Taliban shot and nearly killed a young woman, Malala, on her bus on the way to school. These extremists know that once knowledge is gained, the pursuit of truth and freedom cannot be denied. Just think, in just the last year alone, humans discovered that the Big Bang really did happen. That the Milky Way galaxy has billions of Earth-like planets. And that snapchats don't actually disappear. All of this has been learned. In one year.

On the Boston Public Library, the inscription reads, The Commonwealth Requires the Education of the People as the Safeguard of Order and Liberty. Those Nigerian girls, Malala, and you are all guardians of the world order and liberty.

When I started law school, there were very few women. Very few minorities who were admitted to law school. In the United States of America. That changed. Attitudes changed. The laws changed. Lawyers changed that. This class, from your dean all the way down to the people sitting out here, this class now looks like the United States of America. That happened in a very brief period of time in the United States of America.

The immediate demands you now face can appear overwhelming. Passing the bar exam, starting a new job, finding some way to make a dent in your mountain of debt. Over the past three years, you may have studied bankruptcy laws, but I'm sure you don't want to have a personal experience in this field. You are now one of 40 million Americans who owe \$1 trillion in total student loan debt. For the next few years, it might feel like JD stands for just debt, because now that you are finally done lugging your immense torts or property law books up Beacon Hill, like the Greek tale of Sisyphus, they've been replaced by the crushing weight of student loan debt, not to mention the chilling prospect of several more years of instant Ramen for dinner. That's wrong. And I'm not just talking about the Ramen. We need to help graduates refinance their loans to pay a lower rate like a car or a home. We need to expand financial assistance programs, not cut them, and we have to have the lower the cost of an education by law, so that interest rates on student loans are affordable for young people.

The good news is that each of you now has a passport that has been punched. Now is when you can lift your gaze to the constellation of possibilities for yourselves, for your family, for your neighborhood, for your country. And I'm here to tell you today that you can do well and you can do good at the same time. Here are just a few examples where lawyers are fighting for justice and making a difference in the larger challenges facing the world today. Protect the planet against the greatest challenge of our time, climate change. The planet is sick. There are no emergency rooms for sick planets. Scientists have sounded the climate change alarm. Lawyers have answered the call all the way to the United States Supreme Court. Massachusetts versus the EPA is the defining case. Lawyers have led the way to reduce the red, white and blue CO2 polluting our planet. Polar bears might not pay their retainers on time, but the planet needs some good representation right now. Do your part, no matter where you are, as the green generation. If a kid from Malden, as a commuter, can ultimately write the laws that change our country to wind and solar and plug-in hybrids and all-electric vehicles, then you have an ability to make a difference in anything that you decide that you are going to change with your work during your careers.

In human rights, the flouting of international law by Russia, the savagery of the Syrian civil war, the burgeoning genocide in the Central African Republic, these are all challenges to the principles embodied in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. You don't have to bring a case in the World Court, although you could. You can help a victim of genocide, or someone who's a victim in your own community. You can represent a young girl who has been trafficked in prostitution around the world, or you can help a young girl somewhere in your own community. You can also defend human rights no matter where you go. Ten years ago today, Massachusetts became the first state to recognize same-sex marriage. This week, Idaho and Arkansas joined nearly 20 states where lawyers have now won battles for marriage equality. Opponents may fight this progress, but love and the law overrules all objections. Martin Luther King said the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice, but the truth is that in almost every case of injustice, there were many people jumping on that arc of justice and forcing it to bend. And lawyers were always at the front of that effort, and that is the crucial role you have to right here today.

In America today, nearly half of those who grow up in families in the bottom fifth of income earners will stay there as adults. The average American household made less in 2012 than it did in 1989. Meanwhile, the top 25 hedge fund managers last year made as much as every single kindergarten teacher in the United States combined. You can help. You can do work in legal aid or as a public defender. Do pro bono work. Fight for equal pay for equal work for women, or fight for justice in your own hometown, and fight against the inequality that has wedged its way into our democracy. Our government is supposed to be about checks and balances, yet Citizens United and the recent McCutcheon decision make our democracy more about who is writing the checks than what is in their bank balance. We need to have a constitutional amendment to

overrule Citizens United versus the Federal Election Commission. That is wrong. It's undemocratic. You can help to deliver democracy back to the people.

When I was authoring the telecommunications laws in the early 1990s, not one home had broadband, and the mobile devices we take for granted weren't invented yet. And now, we have an ecosystem of devices, services and apps that allow you never to look up again from your phone. Just like some of you are doing right now, not even looking at me as I'm speaking. And I'm very proud of that revolution. I hope we reach a day when no one ever looks up again and talks to another person. But while I was writing that law, I also made sure that over the last 15 years, \$35 billion were spent to wire every classroom for poor children in the country so they could be online with the wealthiest in our society as well. Because we need a democratization of access to opportunity. Some of you may think you have a constitutional right to watch a cat video while posting to Facebook and downloading a new app, all at the same time, but the idea that the Internet should be free and open, what people call net neutrality, it's under attack from Tahir Square, to Egypt to Independence Square in Kiev, the power of social media to illuminate democratic pursuits has actualized the idealism of the Internet. It is now your turn as defenders of the law to protect this speech we have quickly come to take for granted. Whether it's a tort or a tweet, find ways to amplify your pursuit for justice. For every selfie you take, consider what action you could take selflessly.

So I've given you several examples. I've given you several examples of how you can help advance the causes of your generation. You are going to do well for yourselves and for your families. There's no question about that. But your Suffolk law degree also gives you a responsibility to do good as well for others in the communities that you're going to be living in. But here's the best part. You get to choose. You've made a huge investment. You've been saddled with this handsome debt, but you've punched yourself a ticket to the world of opportunities. You get to choose. Some of you will work in a large law firm. Some of you will work in a boutique firm, which, in my day, was just called a small law firm. Some of you will work for a nonprofit. Some of you will run for office. Some of you will become journalists. Some business leaders. Some educators. Some small-town lawyers. You get to choose. And the choice you're making right now, you have a right to change your choice as you learn more about your life and what you want to do with your life. You're not stuck with the decision you make right now. You can change. You'll be a lawyer with a Suffolk law degree. You'll have a portability in your life that very few people have.

You know that you get to choose today because previous generations, your parents, their parents worked to better their own lives and to better the lives of those around them and your lives. You get to choose because they sacrificed. They fought for equality, for the environment, for human rights, for universal values like liberty and justice that have animated civilizations for centuries. And you get to choose because you have worked hard. You have accomplished much. You are

now Suffolk law school graduates. You get to choose what you will fight for. You get to choose who you will fight for. You are Suffolk law and you will start to change the world today. Congratulations for everything that you are going to do for our world. Thank you all so, so much.