

Suffolk University Law School Commencement
Saturday, May 17, 2014
Citi Performing Arts Center-Wang Theatre
Commencement Speaker
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National Director, Anti-Defamation League

Before I speak, I would like to say something. In America, we value and respect freedom of speech. We celebrate debate, dissent, and difference of opinion. We reject being told whom to listen to, what to believe, or to be bullied or intimidated to accept or reject an opinion or a point of view. In the last few months, we have witnessed in this country in certain academic institutions, an effort by some to dictate to others under threat of disruption, whom to listen to, or whom not to listen to. Some individuals I respect have opted to step aside. I am here today proudly because I not only value the principles of freedom of speech, I am here today because I salute and celebrate and want to show respect to your president, your board of trustees and all of those who stood up to say no, we will not be intimidated. But I'm primarily here out of respect for the students who worked so hard to reach this moment without being told whom they can or cannot listen to. Congratulations and mazel tov.

President McCarthy, Dean Nelson, Chairman Meyer, trustees, professors, faculty, and most important, those of you graduates and your family in the audience, I thank you for this very, very special recognition. For almost 50 years, I have been privileged and lucky to stand on a platform and organization, the Anti-Defamation League, which, for close to a century, has worked tirelessly through education, legislation, litigation, communication and persuasion, to build what Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the beloved community. Now harmonious, diverse, mutually respectful and understanding society where live and let live exist between peoples and nations.

In ADL's 100 years of activity, we have won many battles, breached many barriers. But I wish I could tell you today that we have succeeded, that our job was done, that Dr. King's beloved community was a reality. During the last miraculous turbulent century, we have learned how to walk on the moon, but we have not learned how to walk together in harmony on Earth. We have eradicated polio and smallpox and other forms of pestilence and plague, but we have not eradicated a more persistent, pervasive, pernicious virus of bigotry. We've enacted laws prohibiting all forms of prejudice and discrimination, but somehow, we cannot seem to implement their spirit. We've succeeded in healing the human heart by unblocking it, by bypassing it, even transplanting it, but we have failed, failed to erase hate from it.

There is a temptation today to share with you my views on the global condition, but Senator Markey did it so brilliantly. So what I would rather do today is speak to you very personally, and by my own life's journey, and my particular vision of this moment and what it means to me with the hope that its message will have some meaning to you. I was born at the wrong time at the wrong place for a Jewish kid. Nazi-occupied Poland in 1940 was not the best place to be born. Yet I managed, managed by the intercession of one special person's kindness, courage, compassion and decency, and I guess by miracles, to survive. As I grew older, I tried to understand what it meant that I had survived. And so, the first set of questions was very serious existential questions, why? Why did the Holocaust happen to the Jewish people? Why did over a million and a half Jewish children perish? Why was the world silent? Why didn't the Almighty intervene? To those universal questions of why were added very, very personal questions of why. Guilt questions. Why me? Why me and not the other little boys and girls? Why not them? Why did they perish for the crime, soul crime of being Jewish, and I survived? And as I grew older, I realized that there are no answers, only questions and more questions.

But in the quest to understand came a very, two things became very, very clear. One is that the world knew. There was no CNN. There was no Fox. There were no satellite feeds from far-off places, and there was no Internet. Yet the world knew. Those in positions of power to make decisions to stop what was happening, they knew. They knew every day how many Jews were killed in Lodz, in Baranovich, in Warsaw, in Minsk, in Bialystok. They knew. They also knew for years previous. They knew what was happening to the Jews. Kristallnacht, the night of shattered glass made news. They didn't do very much about it. Nor about the worst that was to follow. And now, now, today, we know about Damascus and Aleppo, and yet, we do precious little.

So, the first lesson is for us to know, to know about bigotry, to know about hatred, to know who is threatening us, our democracy and our freedoms. It's extremely important that we know. But knowing, knowing is not enough. The second thing that became clear to me was that wherever and whenever and however good people stood up to say no, whenever good people stood up and said no to hate, Jews lived, Gypsies lived, Christians lived, gays lived. There was Oskar Schindler who saved 1,200 Jews. There was a Raoul Wallenberg, a Swedish diplomat, who saved 50,000, maybe 100,000. There was an Albania and Bulgaria. It was in the Balkans, people like to make fun of the Balkans, but it was in the Balkans that a magnificent chapter of humanity was written. It wasn't written in the capital cities that provided us with philosophy, with music, with great art, but it was in the Balkans. Bulgaria saved all its Jews because from the king, to the patriarch, to the peasants, to the parliamentarians, they all said no. Albania saved all its Jews because they, too, said to the Nazis, no.

I stand here today because there was a lady by the name of Bronislawa Kurpi, who could barely read and write, who didn't weigh and measure the risks, because maybe if she did, somebody else would be standing here this afternoon. She risked her life every single day for four years to protect the life of another human being.

And so, I stopped asking the questions of why and began to ask the questions on the order of what if. What if instead of one Raoul Wallenberg, there were 10,000 Raoul Wallenbergs? What if instead one Oskar Schindler, there had been 10,000 Oskar Schindlers? What if this wonderful country of ours had permitted the passenger ship to St. Louis to dock at the shores and unload its cargo of refugees? What if we had bombed Auschwitz? What if our neighbors to the north, Canada, had found room for 5,000 Jewish orphans? What if? What if? What if we traded trucks for Jews? What if Switzerland could have permitted the entry of Jewish orphans? What if? What if? What if?

For me, my life's work at the ADL is to do all I can so that our children and grandchildren will never have to ask what if in the future? What if their parents, what if their grandparents had stood up every single day to say no? No to hatred, no to bigotry, no to prejudice, no to racism, no to anti-Semitism. In the rich mosaic of diversity that is the United States of America, we have to find ways to live together and grow together and learn together, how to choose our words carefully, to understand the power and danger of words, and to take responsibility for the words that we utter and their consequences.

The Holocaust did not begin with bricks. It did not begin with gas chambers. It began with words. Ugly, hateful words that demonized and degraded and debased Jews, and those words became ugly, hateful deeds and morphed into the gas chambers. The September 11th attack did not begin with planes transformed into missiles, or box cutters as weapons. It began with words. Ugly, hateful words that demonized, dehumanized, debased Americans and everything that we stand for. And those words became ugly, hateful deeds. We need in every way to denounce the rabble-rousers who traffic in fear and frustration. We need to cleanse our communities of prejudice. We need to speak up and speak out and protest when anyone is maligned or treated with contempt, no matter the victim or the perpetrator. It isn't easy. It sounds easy. It takes courage. It runs the risk of pure disdain and disapproval. Every time that we laugh at ethnic joke or a racial slur or religious stereotype, or let an expression of contempt in silence, we tacitly contribute to the atmosphere of prejudice. It is only silence and indifference that enables the bully to bully, to hurt, to maim, to scar, and even kill.

In Jewish tradition, we believe that life and death is in the power of the tongue. Three times a day, Jews who follow the tradition ask the Lord, lashon hara, keep my mouth from speaking evil. On Yom Kippur, the holy of holy days in Jewish tradition, we confess and seek atonement for the sins we have committed with utterance of the lips and those committed by groundless hatred.

Never again is an 11th commandment etched in the aftermath of Auschwitz. It was etched by the Jewish people based on a Jewish experience, but never again, that pledge, that imperative, that commandment has universal message and mandate for all of us. Certainly all of us in this room must bear witness and be faithful to the commandment which instructs us all to never again be silent whenever anyone is in fear, in danger, isolated or singled out because of the color of their skin, their ethnic origin, their religion, their sexual orientation, or anything, anything that makes them different from the rest.

My personal story translated into motivation for my career at the ADL. The notion that individual courage and individual responsibility was central to combating evil was a central part of my philosophy and that of the ADL. Had there been people of courage to act in 1915 when the Armenian genocide was taking place, had there been international intervention when massacres in Cambodia, Bosnia, and the genocide in Rwanda were happening, innocent lives in great numbers could have been saved.

Assuming moral responsibility for what's happening in the world is a priority. So, too, is respect for the law. That is what motivated me to attend law school those many years ago. Legal training was the perfect complement to the lessons I grew up with. It impelled me to look for a career path where I could use my professional training and my moral focus to make the world a better place. I couldn't have made a better choice myself. My nearly 50 years of career at the ADL has given me a unique opportunity to follow the path so beautifully enunciated by the Jewish sage, Hillel, 2,000 years ago. If I am not for myself, who will be? If I'm only for myself, what am I? That has proved to be the framework for a very satisfying 50 years.

What I can hope for all of you on this wonderful occasion is that you will think, think about how you can use this profound education you have received not only to feed yourselves and your family, but to make a difference in the world. There is so much, so much to be done. Here in America, around the globe, when we see stalemates in Washington and polarization on all levels of society, including the Supreme Court, we cannot help but recognize that your generation, you, have big challenge and opportunity to bring us back to a reasoned civil society.

When we see abroad that history has not ended, despite predictions in the '90s by Francis Fukuyama, when we see power politics at its worst, such as taking place as the senator indicated in Putin, Ukraine, the slaughter in Syria, in Africa, we viscerally understand or should understand the need for reasoned and strong leadership. So, from the bottom of my heart, with a great sense of humility and respect, I wish for you much, much success. But I have a hope. My hope is that you all will find a way, your way, your very, very special your way, to heal a little bit, to repair a little bit the world at this moment of uncertainty that needs healing and repair. Good luck, God bless you, and thank you very, very much.