

Roy Black gave the commencement address to University of Miami Law School graduates on Saturday, May 11, 2018. This is a transcript of his remarks.

A Call to Arms

Being a trial lawyer is one of the great adventures of the human spirit. It is not just mastering the technicalities of the craft, it requires far more. It demands that you leave behind you a little piece of yourself in every case.

There is a book title that sums up the practice of law for me – "Give Everything, Quantify Nothing, and Create Something Greater than Yourself."

Fifty years ago, I sat where you are today, contemplating an opaque future:

What will be my path?

Who will be my guide?

Where will I find my place?

If only we had a map. A set of step-by-step instructions on how to get from here to there.

There was an ad in a magazine. Learn to write stories. Easy-to-understand instructions. Send \$20. You send in your money and in return they send you a dictionary with a sheet that said, "Some assembly required."

You are the storyteller of your own life.¹

It can be an inspiring one – or not.

Now let me take a moment to pause to recognize certain leaders of this university... obviously Dr. Frenk who has done an outstanding job as president, Dr. Duerk who is the provost. And I particularly wanted to mention my friend Mark Raymond who is president of the Law Alumni Association, because he will be calling you on Monday morning for donations.

I am honored to speak at Patricia White's final commencement as dean and being able to congratulate her for 10 years of outstanding leadership at this remarkable law school. She has a long list of accomplishments, which time does not allow me to get into, but I want to particularly mention one of them – Law Without Walls – because I had a personal involvement in it. This was an extraordinary program – forward-looking, different – something you don't see in a law school. It is something different that opened my eyes to

things that are new. It creates or takes the creative power of not just lawyers, but business men, financiers, technologists, bankers, hedge funds, who all get together to create breakthrough ideas. It really is an extraordinary program and I am sure you will join me in saying, I am proud to have a dean who believes in knocking down walls – instead of building them.

And I'd also like to recommend the parents, grandparents, friends, family of all the graduates today and we join you in congratulating each one of them and celebrating the many achievements that have distinguished the Class of 2019.

Dean White, and the excellent faculty of this law school, have trained you to the highest degree, and made you ready to step into a world of unprecedented challenges. Challenges which can only be tackled by someone with your skills. We lawyers cannot change the world. That is the province of politicians. We have a higher calling – we change the lives of people. One at a time.

And as Judaism tell us: “If you save one life, it's as if you've saved the world.”

Today on the cusp of your career, I issue a challenge to each one of you:

Who among you will rescue the children being held in steel cages at our southern border?
Children who our government treats as collateral damage?

Who among you will seek DNA from death row inmates?

Who among you will prosecute or defend war criminals at The Hague?

Who among you will be willing to take on the existential threat against our environment – and treat the climate crisis as the biggest threat in human history?

Who among you will continue the campaign to ensure that every American, regardless of the ability to pay, has the right to health care. It is not a coincidence that this mission began by a president who taught constitutional law.

Who among you will attend 8 a.m. bail hearings for indigent prisoners?

Who among you will fight for each one of the 68 million refugees, who, men, women and children, who are desperately fleeing the monsters who make war on them, whether they be: the drug gangs of Central America; whether it be Assaad bombing and gassing their cities in Syria or the African warlords on the plains of Africa?²

Who among you will ensure that they be treated humanely, and not turn a blind eye to their torture?

Who among you will stand up against the bigotry directed at African Americans, Native Americans, other people of color, the Jews, the Muslims, the Hindus, the Sikhs, immigrants and every other despised minority in America today?

Who among you will seek the closure of the concentration camp at Guantanamo? Who will have the audacity to demand fair trials or even a trial for suspected terrorists who have been held there for 17 years without any justice in sight?

Who among you would be willing to step forward to defend a Julian Assange, or a Bill Cosby or even the Stoneman Douglas High School shooter? Or would you join with your peers at Harvard who are protesting a law professor who had the absolute nerve to represent somebody like Harvey Weinstein?

I urge you not to fear displeasure of the crowd or the criticism of the of the trolls. Our constitution and laws are toothless if they only protect those who are popular.

Fifty years ago, Robert Kennedy speaking to graduates like you said, "This school does not train bystanders."

If we don't stand up for the rights of others who will? We lawyers stand up for those who can't stand up for themselves.

We stand up against the inhumane treatment of this dark era.

We stand up against the cruelty, the oppression and racism.

Throughout the history of this Republic it has always been the lawyers who have stood for America's highest ideals.

This is not the time to remain silent and be complacent. History will long remember the cowardice of those who enabled and made excuses. But it will also remember the courage of those who spoke out and resisted.

In 1989, a lone, and still anonymous, Chinese student stood in front of a column of tanks and created for us the enduring image of courage.

When you have earned the privilege of being called to the bar you will take an oath:

To give true faith and allegiance to the principles upon which this nation was founded;
To never reject the cause of the defenseless or the oppressed;
To never mislead by a false statement of fact or law;
To act only with such means which are consistent with truth and honor.

Let me repeat that... to act only with such means that are consistent with truth and honor.

I challenge each of you to accept this responsibility.

Will you rise up and accept it?

Will you be responsible to the truth even when our government cannot distinguish it from the lies? When it shamelessly insists that "truth isn't truth" or tries to distract us by claiming "alternative facts."

Will you be responsible enough to sacrifice by seeking justice as a prosecutor or public defender?

Will you be responsible enough to do the public interest work that your clinics, internships, and pro bono activities have trained you?

The first sentence of the Model Rules of Professional Conduct call to us: "Lawyers play a vital role in the preservation of society."

This requires you to detach from self-interest and serve others. Will you be faithful to this commitment to contribute to your community, your nation, your world – and to all those it protects and empowers.

I urge each one of you to take on a personal commitment, to take on some deep problem, some complex issue, some radical injustice of our age... and become the advocate for it.

Nelson Mandela, reflecting on his careers as a lawyer, as a political prisoner, as a statesman said, "What counts in life is not the mere fact that we have lived. It is what difference we have made to the lives of others that determine the significance of the life we lead."

I repeat – how we improve the lives of others tells us the success and significance of our own lives. Over your career you will be responsible for the trajectory of hundreds of people.

So, ladies and gentlemen: 50 years from today, you will be called upon to answer these questions.

When you reflect back on your career will you be able to say:

I fought for what was right;

I fought to protect what was important;

I used these great skills to help people – people who turned to you in the most desperate times of their lives – when their fortune was at risk, when their families were in jeopardy, when they could lose their children, when they could lose their freedom, when they could lose their very lives.

We lawyers have the unique power to protect human life and freedom – never allow that power to go unfulfilled.

Nelson Mandela is not enshrined in every man's heart because he was an excellent lawyer. He rests there because he inspired the world to move towards justice.

You may underestimate your ability. You may lack confidence. You may fear taking on these seemingly impossible tasks, but you can derive strength from the words of Maryanne Williamson:

“Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be?”

Class of 2019 – believe in yourself – now it’s time to go out and inspire the world.

¹ Partial quote by Isabel Allende.

² Partial quote from the Boston Globe.