President McCarthy, Dean Nelson, Chairman of the Boardman Andrew Meyer, members of the Board of Trustees, especially my sponsor today, Roger Berkowitz, distinguished faculty members, parents, parents, spouses, by the way, spouses and partners most of all, I’m sure there’s someone in the lives of you who are graduating today who made this possible. Don’t forget them ever.

Members of the proud Suffolk University law graduate class of 2013. It’s amazing. I’m still getting used to this century, the idea of 20. So many of you people I’ve known. So many people have gone to Suffolk Law. And people I’ve cared about have come here, and I feel like I’m coming home today. Congressman Joe Moakley. What a guy he was. Other members of the U.S. Congress, Marty Meehan, John Tierney, Bill Keating, my friend Jim O’Day, and Suffolk Law, the one I’m going to talk about most today, the one who taught me so much, the former general counsel and chief political strategist for Tip O’Neill, my lost colleague, Kirk O’Donnell, Suffolk Law Class of 1975.

I’m approaching a graduation of my own of a kind, and some of you in the audience will know what that’s like. I’m about to sign up for the rest of my life to MSNBC, which means finally I don’t have to go law school. I’ve been thinking about it and worrying about it like you people would have been if you hadn’t gone, for about 40 years, so you made the right choice. If you even thought about going to law school, go. And you’ve already met that standard. Anyway, by the way, if you want to change this document I’m getting today, just a few words. It’ll be like a real one. I would accept that, too.

Anyway, remember the movie, The Verdict? Everybody here must have seen it. The Boston Lawyer. Played by Paul Newman. He used to go to the bar at night. He’d always say it’s the long road that has no tarn. I liked the way he said tarn. It’s sort of an Irish version of turning. Life, as your dean just told you, is filled with, as she put it, serpentine movements. Things keep changing in your life, and you’ve got to be ready for that. That’s the great thing about being a lawyer. Lawyers can be secretaries of state. They can be presidents of universities. You got a degree that can give just about all the flexibility in your life you can imagine. You can even be a rich business guy like Roger. So it’s possible. You can turn that degree any way you want to turn it.

I found a way to make a living basically in any market. A congressman told me I’m still making a living doing what I used to do for free in the Holy Cross cafeteria. Basically arguing politics. My nickname in college, you all have nicknames up here. I don’t know what it is about Massachusetts. Everybody’s got a nickname. Mine was Arguing Matthews. That’s the nicest nickname in the world. In fact, David Teak who is with me today. He’s my classmate and friend for 50 years from Holy Cross. We met in 1963. He calls me Mattie Mattel. He’s been calling me Mattie Mattel since the ‘60s when they used the commercial on television: You know it’s
swell, it’s Mattel. So somehow I got the name Mattie Mattel. Anyway, I said, nicknames up here.

I want to talk to you today about some things. They may not be highfalutin. They may not big and grand but I’m going to give you some advice about politics and life, which I know works because I’ve seen it work so many times and I learned it like you’re going to learn it, I hope. And it’s going to matter to you a day from now, a week from now, when you’re looking for a job, looking for clients, maybe 20, 30 years from now. It’s not about Benghazi, whatever that’s about. It’s not about the IRS, and I think I know what that’s about. It’s not about the Associated Press story, and I think I know what that’s about. It’s really about you and your life and what are you going to do with that law degree you just got. It’s about how you’re going to learn from here on out.

I want to focus today on a subject I’ve given a lot of thought to over the years, written about, tried to become something of an expert at: the politics of work, of career, of life. I once heard the historian Arthur Scheslinger, who wrote so much about Franklin Roosevelt and the Kennedys, say that politics is essentially a learning profession, like being a doctor or a dentist or a lawyer. You keep learning as you go along. You really don’t learn anything in school. You learn it when you get in your practice. I hear that’s very true of the law. You learn how to be an attorney, a good one, by being one out there in court, by trying cases, and by watching others in the courtroom, especially the judges. Anyway, that’s what happens on The Good Wife, and that’s what I really know about. I’m a huge fan of Alicia Florrick. I never, I have not missed one Good Wife, and people tell me that The Good Wife is the real thing, including the intramurals in the law firm. So get all the back episodes and you’ll be ready.

I have a confession to make today. I am not a street-smart politician. I didn’t start out getting politics. I thought it was all about, as a kid, it was about speeches and TV debates and philosophy, liberal versus conservative, conservative versus liberal. That’s what I thought it was about. I didn’t know what happened in the back rooms of life where the cameras don’t show up, and that’s how I arrived in Washington in 1971, a freshman, two years in the Peace Corps in Africa, thinking about what I saw on TV and read in the newspapers, this is what politics was. I never understood, growing up, the human part of politics. That’s how I arrived in Washington. As I said, coming back from teaching business in Africa in Swaziland and that’s how I began my education in what I would call human politics.

And if you don’t think what I’m going to talk about now is important to you, you don’t get it. You’re going to get it because I’m going to explain it to you in a way that nobody can’t get it. It’s about soul. It’s about people. I didn’t know anybody when I got to Washington out of the Peace Corps. Actually I knew one guy. He worked on the elevators on the outside. And the way he got his job taught me everything in the world. He didn’t get it from a congressman the way you usually get it. He got it from a friend who worked for the congressman. And, by the way, that’s how it works. You had to know somebody. I was quickly learning everything or most everything about how Washington really worked. Somebody knew somebody who went to school with somebody. Somebody’s wife went to school with somebody, or they somehow connected or somebody gave money. This will really shock you. Somebody gave money to a politician. Sometimes it helps.
My first job was working, as the president said, President McCarthy, I was the Capitol policeman. I worked from 3 to 11. I had the graveyard shift. I loved that job. I had gotten the job from a senator’s AA, Wayne Owens. Wayne had worked as a top-floor assistant. He was the top-floor assistant to Ted Kennedy when he was majority whip. And before that, Wayne Owens had worked for Bobby Kennedy around the states. He was his top guy. Wayne must have liked the idea. I had served in the Peace Corps, knew economics, and also I think that I was a Catholic, had gone to college up here in Massachusetts. He was a Mormon from Utah and a real Kennedy true believer.

As I said, I didn’t know anybody really in Washington. I met Wayne who got me the Capitol Police job to work at night while I worked during the day answering complicated legislative questions from mail. People had written in. And writing short speeches for the senator, Frank Moss, the last liberal to represent Utah. As I said, it was a long time ago. The men I worked with on the Capitol Police force were a mix of guys. Some of them were young guys going to law school. They had political connections. The other guys because they could get the job to go to law school down there. The other guys were ex-military, a lot of them country boys. In fact, one of those country boys taught me a lesson. I keep reminding my elite friends in my business especially. His name’s Leroy Taylor. He’s from West Virginia, former MP. Commuted every day from West Virginia to Washington to be a cop. He said to me one day, because he thought I was teaching. He said, you know why the little man loves his country? And I thought a bit and I wanted to answer. He said, because it’s all he’s got. And when you get that about American life, you start to figure things out. It’s all he’s got. His country.

My other political lesson on the job was this. My mother always said, it wasn’t what you know, it’s who you know. There’s a limit to that. It only goes so far. It’s not who you know. It’s who you get to know. That’s your message today. I met Wayne after knocking on 200 doors on Capitol Hill. Senators and congressman. I started with the Irish Catholics from the Northeast, the Democrats. I thought that was my tribal way in the door. And I ended up getting a job with a Mormon guy from Utah. And I’m not bragging. I am not bragging. I’m just saying, if somebody asked me how I got started in all the business I’ve been in for writing speeches for presidents, being a top guy with … and then AA to the Speaker of the House, it all started with knocking on doors and asking for a job. And as it worked out, and, as the lawyer said in The Verdict, “It’s the long road that has no tarn.”

My getting to know Wayne Owens, the Mormon from Utah, got me in the door. And this is the way it’s been for me my whole life. Senator Moss got me my job with Senator Muskie, one of the best senators we’ve ever had in this country. My old girlfriend at that time, Pat McGuinness, got me a lead on where the White House job was when I got a job at the White House. She told me how to get in that door. I got to be a speech writer to the president because a friend of a friend I’d met in Brooklyn at a Brooklyn campaign was chief speech writer to Carter and after recommending another guy for the job when there was an opening, I recommended myself. I asked to do it. He gave me the job. This is how it works.

My most important job, of course, all these years of working in politics before I went into journalism was working as AA to Tip O’Neill. It was the best training in real-world politics,
streetcorner politics I could have ever gotten. O’Neill’s office is where I met your fellow alumnus, Kirk O’Donnell. It’s also where we … fight with President Ronald Reagan in what I consider the greatest all-Irish political fight card in American history. O’Neill had a number of rules that have never let me down. One is, of course, all politics is local. It’s really shorthand for the simple fact of life that if you want to understand where someone else is coming from how to get to them, you better pay attention to their interests, what they care about most, the people they care about, the goals they’ve got for themselves and their family. The rule can be a little overdone at times but it’s incredibly helpful. When you’re dealing with someone, you’re up against someone in court, you need someone for a job or a client, to know what they are thinking about, not what you are thinking about. What they want and what they fear. When you want a job, don’t tell some person what you care about, what you want. Find out ahead of time what he or she cares about, and that will work.

The other tip I’ve got from Tip is to ask. If you want something, you’ve got to ask for it. If you really want something, you’ve got to ask hard. He would always tell the story of the woman who lived across the street from him in north Cambridge who gave him hell for not asking for a [vote] in that first race for Cambridge City Council when he was a senior at BC. People like to be asked. She scolded him after he had failed to do so. After he had taken her for granted and also lost the election. Lesson. When someone close to you decides to run for office, it could be student council. I gave my daughter this advice and it worked when she finally accepted my advice. She ran for student body. I said, you want to win this time? I know this business. This is how you win. Spend most of your time, first of all, score everybody in the class as one, two, or three. One, the ones that love you, say hello to you, hang out with you, you count on them for your vote. Two, you get along with them. You know their names but you have to sell them, and three, stay away from them. Then go campaigning with the ones, every single one of the ones, and ask them for their vote and get their answer yes. Lock in your base. It’s what life’s all about. Don’t take for granted. Your family, your friends. When you need something, ask them for their help first, and lock them in. Only then do you proceed to campaign and give your best pitch to the twos. And as for the threes, keep it cool. There’s a reason you decided they were threes. Don’t go near them.

The thing about Tip was, he told me to ask. If you want something in life, don’t sit home waiting for the phone to ring. Don’t just send out resumes. I tell this to kids your age. I know you’re kids. You may not like the word but kids. Don’t send out resumes. Don’t send out emails. Go to where the job is and ask for it. And don’t ask for an interview. Ask for the job. I can promise one thing. Nobody’s coming door to door asking you what you’d like to do next with your life. Nobody’s coming. No recruiter’s coming knocking on your door and asking what your dreams are. You’ve got to knock on their doors asking what they need, telling them what you can do to help them get what they want. That’s how it works. Let me say now I’ve learned about negotiation. It’s a very important part of being a lawyer -- negotiation. It may come in handy in your practice. One of the great stories you hear in Washington these days, it’s so, by the way, Washington is angry, dysfunctional, sometimes confused today. All you hear about is how great it was between Tip O’Neill and Ronald Reagan. How they could fight like tigers in the day but still get along personally after 6. Well, since I’m writing a book about that right now, it comes out in November. Simon & Schuster. November. Remember that. Say $30.00. I’ll be giving a lot to thought to how it worked, why it was so different back then. You
parents, you may remember how better it was and different back then. But they managed to get so much done together. Tip and Reagan, Social Security reform, reforming the tax code, working for peace in Northern Ireland, and in very small but important ways, ending the Cold War.

For one thing, they didn’t do all this Mickey Mouse stuff. There’s no shutdowns of government. There’s no filibusters, no log jamming. All that crap we see in Washington today. They didn’t play that game. What they did do was listen to the voter and respect the voter. This is what’s changed. When Reagan won his big victory in 1980, Tip didn’t act like it never happened. He saw what had happened. He saw Reagan win a big election. And he didn’t stand in the way. The American people had spoken, and he knew it. He didn’t like what they said, but he knew the message, and he had played that message. He didn’t try putting on roadblocks. He didn’t try shutting down the government. Didn’t try to shut down Washington. He didn’t resort to the old scorch tactics, the parliamentary tactics. He didn’t act like the spoiled kid. And when he knows he’s losing the game, takes his ball home. That’s the way it is in politics today. It’s my ball and I’m going home. And Reagan didn’t either. He gave Reagan his timetable in 1981 and ’82. He let the House vote. He argued against what Reagan proposed with the big cuts, the big tax breaks, but he didn’t screw around with the thing either. And compare that to today. And then two years later, when Tip leads the Democrats back to a big victory in the ’82 midterms, Reagan did the same exact thing. He saw who had won and made that historic deal with O’Neill that saved the Social Security system for decades to come. He saved it the way that Tip wanted it saved by protecting the people who needed Social Security the most. They also agreed to a pretty decent jobs bill. How different is that now? It’s a lot different. The big thing with something Kirk O’Donnell, Tip’s chief counsel and chief political adviser said to us all the time, no matter how much you disagree in court or how much you disagree in politics, don’t let it shut down the communication between you and the other side. Always be able to talk. Always be able to talk. Never let it get so hard that you can’t pick up the phone and put something together when it’s in your interest or the public’s interest.

I remember how when the president said something tough or Tip said something tough. And Reagan would always call up an hour or two later and calm things down. Keep it open. And how other times when Tip did something blasting at Reagan, Reagan’s staff would get mad at Tip and would want to go after him and Reagan would say, oh, that’s just Tip. They wanted to get along. Or when Tip felt he had gone too far. He’d say, it wasn’t Reagan he was blaming. It was those rich guys he hung around with. Or he’d take a shot accidentally off the record against Nancy Reagan, and then he’d call up the White House to Mike Deaver and say: What I do? I hurt her feelings, and he’d say, Write a personal letter to her and apologize, and Tip did that and he’d say very nice things in the letter. They were always trying to get along, even though they disagreed in 180. Tip and the Gipper did other things to keep the channels open. They celebrated each other’s birthdays. I don’t think Boehner and Obama have birthdays together. Every time you open to Tip just to have a two- or three-hour lunch together with some champagne on Tip’s birthday, on Reagan’s birthday, Tip was there with the cake, and they give each other presents. On the St. Patrick’s Day, they spent the whole afternoon together. They really worked at being friendly even though they were opposing each other. And the staffs got along pretty well, too. Always be able to talk. It gets things done. Saving Social Security in ’83, passing in ’86, the most equitable tax bill in history. Imagine the tax bill that cleaned up all the
dirty loopholes and let people the top rate -- and conservatives out there might like this -- of 28 percent. They put that together.

They all said that the little things -- there was a friend of mine who was a real Dorothy Day Catholic worker, Catholic, who worked for the homeless. He was an advocate for the homeless, and I knew him. And he was out on a hunger strike at 55 or 56 days, and he wouldn’t eat because they were about to name a nuclear attack submarine Corpus Christi. And he thought Body of Christ was a bad thing to call a warship. And so I got Tip to call Reagan. We got it fixed. That Monday Reagan changed the name of the ship to the City of Corpus Christi. We would do little things like that. It’s amazing how those things matter.

Another matter close to the heart was Ireland. Tip was one of those working for peace in Northern Ireland. He had been with the old crowd, the IRA before, but after the troubles since ’70, he was against all the violence. He got to Reagan. He knew Reagan was close to Margaret Thatcher. He got Reagan to go to Thatcher, and all this was in secret at the time until Tip died. He never mentioned it. All in secret. He got Reagan and Thatcher to agree to the Anglo-Irish agreement, which led to the Good Friday accord in ’98, and I was there, and I’ve got to tell you. There’s nothing for someone like myself who’s Catholic than to be in a hall filled with Protestant working guys, cheering peace with the Catholics. All that happened because of secret dealings between Tip and Reagan. Things work if you’re able to talk. Always be able to talk.

It played a big part in the Cold War ending. Tip was the first delegation leading a bipartisan delegation to meet Mikhail Gorbachev … to the Soviet Union. Before Reagan ever him, he said, I’ve got a letter here from the president. He wants to meet with you. And Gorbachev didn’t understand. He said, you’re the leader of the opposition. What’s an opposition? And Tip says it means we don’t disagree on everything. He said Reagan wants to meet him, and when he does meet him, he wants the leader of the Soviet Union to know that when he speaks for his party and his presidency, he’s speaking for all America. That’s what Tip said to Gorbachev when he first him. This is the way America ought to be run. And later, when Reagan met with Gorbachev, it was Tip who told the … on the Democratic side, don’t push the freeze vote right when they’re meeting, because it will screw up the chance for a good negotiation on nuclear arms reduction. And because the Democrats called their … and said, Reagan’s request, Gorbachev and Reagan were able to have their first ever nuclear arms reduction treaty in history, and they also began to end the Cold War. It’s amazing stuff. And I came across a letter from Reagan once. A har-d nosed guy in New York said, Why are so nice to the guy? He’s on the other side. And Reagan said, well, I didn’t like the picture of opposing lawyers having lunch together during a trial. That was a little too cozy. It was important to be civil even cordial to the leader of the opposition in order to get things done. Always be able to talk.

So what have I learned all these years since leaving school? Most of what I know, I’ve learned that it’s not who I know, it’s who you get to know. I’ve learned the importance of asking. And of keeping the channels open with people I come up against, especially the people I come against. Remember Godfather II? Michael Corleone? He’s just been bombed by Hyman Roth. What’s he do? He goes and has lunch with Hyman Roth. Keep your friends close, your enemies closer. It’s true. Let me go over that ask thing again. If you’re a minority and you get the word that an opening has never been filled by someone of your background, maybe being a woman or
gay or an ethnic minority, and nobody’s ever had a job over there, so your tendency would be, why waste my time. That’s where I say go for it. Make them say no. Never say no to yourself. Ask. Make them be the bad guy. Don’t let yourself be the hesitant person. Make them be the bad guy. Make them say no to your face. That’s the way to do it. Show up, ask for the job, and if they say no, say how come? What’s the story here? Push. Chutzpah. Chutzpah. I’m not Jewish. But I know the importance of it.

And keep in touch. In this room and the front part of this room, it was the back part. You have context now. You have other young people looking for law jobs. Other people looking for clients. They’re going to hear about openings. The larger your network of people in this room right up here, the more you stay in touch with a dozen or so people you’re close to, the more you stay in touch with a hundred or so you know, the more you’re going to hear about things, you’re going to hear somebody’s call. Did you hear about this opening over there? ... You can sit with this client? I can’t handle this person. This is perfect for you. Did you hear about this company that’s doing a startup? They need a lawyer. Perfect for you. I’ve got a job. Use everyone here as your listening post. You’ve got a hell of a team here. Unless you’ve been a recluse for the last three or four years, you’ve got friends here. They are your lifeline. They’re the ones you call. Keep in touch. Have lunch. Use each other as your first building block of a network. It’s not who you know. It’s who you get to know, and you already know each other. You’re already there. So use each other. I know it sounds very communitarian but it’s true. All this village stuff. But this is true. Friends are really helpful. Every job I ever got was from a friend. I never got any jobs from an enemy. If they call you up and say, gee, here. So nobody’s coming to your door asking you what your dreams are, what you’re dreaming about when your head’s on the pillow at night. Nobody’s coming. You’ve got to get out there and ask. And never say no to yourself. Always say yes to yourself. If you do, you don’t know where you’re going to end up. Remember what that Boston lawyer said. The night before. He’s in a bar one night before he won a big case against the church. “It’s the long road that has no tarn.”

I thank you for the honor of having me here today. The honor of just giving me this great award. I wish it was a real law degree actually. It’s a nice one though. And I give big congrats to all of you. Big congrats for what you’ve done. All the hard work. Working other jobs while you’re here, moonlighting, whatever you had to do. I know how hard it is. I know what Suffolk means to all my friends who went here. It’s tough. It’s hard and it’s always on top of something else you have to do, like have kids and working hard and keeping it all together and multi-tasking. Even guys can multi-task if they really have to. And all I can say, as they say on Broadway, go out there and break a leg. Thank you.