

Commencement 2009
Massachusetts Attorney General Martha Coakley
Address to Suffolk University Law School

Good morning. To the President, the Board of Trustees, the esteemed faculty, parents and friends, our guests today, but most importantly to you the graduates, before my formal remarks I want to just make a short preface. I must say that I never pass up an opportunity to put on the Harry Potter stuff. [LAUGHTER]

Every year all over the country speakers are asked to speak at endless graduations, high school, college, graduate school. The speaker is, one hopes, someone who in a brief period of time because of whoever he or she is can impart some timeless yet fresh inspiration for graduates, who frankly are inclined to be uninterested in a speaker or her words. There's a special place in purgatory for all graduation speakers, [LAUGHTER] unremembered, unremarkable, underwhelming. I have made an effort, however feeble, to provide something for everyone and provide at least some of you with one thing you might remember for a day or two when someone asks, what did your speaker say?

I think this year is even more challenging. It is a tough year to be graduating from law school. I recall that it's almost 30 years ago, it was actually May 20, 1979, that I was the student speaker at my law school graduation, chosen, not by grades, I will say, but about, it was a contest. And I spoke about the need, not just to sound good, but to say something. And I made a reference to May 20th, which was Eliza Doolittle Day, if any of you are fans of *My Fair Lady*. Henry Higgins had taken a poor flower girl and passed her off as royalty by improving her speech and accent. And I reminded my colleagues that even though we now knew what to say or knew how to sound like lawyers, it was really more important that we had something to say that mattered.

I'd like to for the next few minutes provide ABCs for the law school graduate, I guess almost in the style of *Poor Richard's Almanac*. Today it would be Poor Richard's Blog, I'm sure. You will remember, or at least the American History majors will, that Poor Richard was one of Ben Franklin's alter egos. This was before the First Amendment, and it was deemed wise when printing most things to try and remain anonymous. So here it goes.

A is for activism, physically, mentally. It keeps you young, it keeps you healthy. It's the best way for you to stay in shape and it is the best way for you to keep the issues that you care about in shape. As for judicial activism, it is usually the label given to judges and their cases with whom the labeler disagrees.

B, be somebody. Not necessarily somebody famous or important, but somebody who makes a difference. Ralph Waldo Emerson reminded us that there is

something that you can do better than another. Listen to the inward voice and bravely obey that. Do the things that [with] you are great. Be a lawyer who is competent and respected, and do things you care about.

C. C is for courage. Examples. An 11-year-old with leukemia. Rosa Parks, who refused to go the back of the bus. John Hancock, who signed the Declaration of Independence very large so George III could read it without his glasses. The domestic violence victim who leaves the abuse. You all recognize it when you see it. You all have some. Use it appropriately and support others who do. I will make a note that I have another C reference when I get to X because I couldn't think of anything beginning with X. [LAUGHTER]

D is for dogs. They have unconditional affection for their owners and are happy to work, eat, run, and chew bones. Sometimes we all, especially lawyers, could learn from their simplicity and, well, frankly, their doggedness with a bone.

E is for environment. I know, I used to hate to recycle too, and if God wanted a green earth, she wouldn't have given us plastic or Styrofoam. But seriously, you and your children and grandchildren have some serious challenges around global warming. At least learn what inconvenient truth Al Gore's been talking about, and rent the *Road Warrior* and *Mad Max* for review of an unpleasant future based on too little fossil fuel. In 2006, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts challenged the Environmental Protection Agency, claiming that they were not doing what they were supposed to do. And believe it or not, before the Supreme Court, we won. It was the lawyers' argument, and particularly lawyers' oral argument, that made difference. Lawyers' planning can focus critical discussion on energy and the environment.

F and G. That stands for facts and getting them right. Facts matter and fact finding matter. John Adams, as you recall, said facts are stubborn things. In history, law, and science, all correct conclusions and wise courses of action begin with knowing the facts. This is particularly true for lawyers. Play fast and loose with the facts and you may as well set that diploma you're getting today on fire and find another profession.

Humility. H. Someone is always smarter than you. Even when you are successful and important, remember, as they say in Nebraska about the turtle on the fence, he didn't get there by himself. Remember those who helped you to be successful and who continue to help you through life.

I is for integrity. The only thing worse than an incompetent lawyer without integrity is a competent lawyer without integrity. As a lawyer, you have only your time and your integrity to make a living. If your reputation for integrity is impaired, set that diploma on fire.

J is for judge not lest you yourself be judged. In other words, practice some tolerance until at least you know the facts, and then judge fairly and wisely. This is true especially if you become a judge. You know, if there's an opening on the Supreme Court, there may be one or there is one, you don't need judicial experience apparently. Don't [look] any opportunities for your future lives.

K. Let's see, in sports, K is a strikeout. We hope Daisuke has many. In money, K is a thousand. In law, K is shorthand for contract, as you know or hope you know before you take the bar exam. [LAUGHTER] Even before text messaging we started reducing everything to letters. If you asked a 10-year-old who's pitching, he might say IDKDK. The younger people will get that. [LAUGHTER] So honor your contracts, manage your money wisely and try not to strike out.

L is for life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, and I stress pursuit. No one guarantees you happiness. It's a good thing that John Hancock wrote so large, because we might not be enjoying all of those rights, at least as Americans. And again, it is only the pursuit that is warranted, warranted, not the happiness.

M. M is for a *Man for All Seasons*. And I want to just give you briefly some of the words that I've had on my office wall since at least becoming district attorney. And they are from the play about Sir Thomas More and Henry VIII. When Sir Thomas More is being urged to send out to arrest someone who his son-in-law believes has been treasonable, he's urged to arrest him because his son-in-law says for libel, he's a spy. His daughter says: He is, Father, arrest him. And says: Father, that man's bad. Thomas More says there's no law against that. But there is God's law, says his son-in-law. Then God can arrest him, says More, sophistication upon sophistication. And More finally says that he is not one who can judge God's law. I'm not God. He says the currents and eddies of right and wrong which you find such plain sailing, I can't navigate. I'm no voyager. But in the thickets of the law, there I'm a forester. I doubt if there's a man alive who could follow me there, thank God. And his daughter says, while you talk, he's gone. And More says, and go he should if it was the devil himself until he broke the law. His son-in-law, so you'd give the devil the benefit of the doubt. And More says, yes, I would. What would you do? Cut a great [swath] through the law to get after the devil? His son says, I'd cut down every law in England to do that. And More says, oh, but when the last law was down and the devil turned around on you, where would you hide, Roper, the laws all being flat? This country's planted thick with laws from coast to coast, man's laws, not God's. And if you cut them down, and you're just the man to do it, do you really think you could stand upright in the winds that would blow then? Yes, I'd give the devil the benefit of law for my own safety's sake.

N is for never say never, except sometimes there are things we should never do. Don't not look before crossing the street, never touch the third rail, never forget Mother's Day or your wedding anniversary. And never assume a woman is pregnant, as I did once and was wrong, and I will never do that again.

[LAUGHTER] Never pretend that you understand the rule against perpetuities.
[LAUGHTER]

O is for open your eyes and mind. Your undergraduate education gave you a good start and a road map to figure out your lives and your work. Keep them both open in the pursuit of happiness in your new profession. Don't let what you learned in law school close, either. Mark Twain: "I never let schooling get in the way of my education."

P is for patriotism. I still get goose bumps when I say the Pledge of Allegiance and, as this morning as we heard that wonderful rendition of the Star Spangled Banner. I urge you to participate in this imperfect but extraordinary and risk-taking experiment in democracy called the United States. Whether it's school committee or Congress, whether it's your PTA or the presidency, care about your city, your country, your community. Get involved in politics and vote. It has never been more important, and it matters whom we elect.

Q is for Don Quixote, who tilted at windmills and said live life not as it is, but as it should be.

R is for risks. Take them. Not foolish risks, but every risk takes some thought and some courage. Nothing ventured, nothing gained. I think that's Poor Richard. Some risks are personal and some are professional. Since we do not have a crystal ball to see the future, learning to take risks is the way we achieve what we want to do. And since I'm the attorney general, I get to use a double negative. Not taking risks and being risk-averse is to risk not having a successful and happy life.

S is for stress. Lawyers particularly seem subject to stress, hours, pressure to perform, balancing life and work. Recognize that your stress management is as important to your health as your annual check-up. Stress will take both a mental and physical toll on you personally and professionally. It can be fatal. Learn to take walks. Get a dog.

T is for tax law. Never underestimate the extent to which tax policy directs personal and business decisions. Also, remember to pay them. [LAUGHTER]

U. OK, this is about you today. You have, all like the turtle on the fence, had a lot of help to get here today. And I know you appreciate what your family and friends have done to support you. Congratulations. Reaching this day is no small feat. Today you are still the turtle. And you should be proud.

V is for volunteer. If you don't have a job, volunteer for the thing you think you'd like to do. If you can pay the bills by waitressing, bartending, working in a store, understand that this experience will be an investment in your career if you can volunteer in something you want to do. In the late '70s and '80s there were

lots of volunteers at not-for-profits and state agencies. I know that because I was part of that generation. And if you have a job, you should volunteer for your local bar, see what your firm's or your business's pro bono policy is. It will give you experience that you may enjoy that you may not have thought, and you will appreciate it when you do get your first paycheck.

W is for words. It's important how and when we use them, whether in a birthday card or a condolence card or in a contract, in a Declaration of Independence. Words have started wars and made divorces inevitable. Be careful with your words, particularly as lawyers, but never be stingy with them when you can help someone.

X. Remember I told you X is for commitment. [LAUGHTER] Keep your word. Keep your promises to your family, to your school, to your church, to yourself. Eleanor Roosevelt, a personal hero of mine said: "You must do the thing you think you cannot do."

And Z. Z is for Zamboni. [LAUGHTER] Every once in a while ever wish you had a personal Zamboni for the day at work where communication with a friend or sibling or significant other, and because you were all out there working under stress, the ice of life just got cut up and scarred and gnarly? Well, you do have it. And it is called, I'm sorry, can we start over? Can we start from scratch? Don't be afraid to use that mulligan, the do-over personal Zamboni as often as needed. But mean it.

Finally, to all of you, congratulations. Good luck. Enjoy the journey, the career, and the pursuit of happiness. A, B, C. It's easy. It's like counting up to three. With this degree, and I know you will all pass the bar. Like Eliza Doolittle, you move from flower girl in the gutter to well-spoken royalty. Make sure that you just don't sound good, but that you have something to say. Thank you.
[APPLAUSE]