

Commencement 2009
Journalist Ted Koppel
Transcript of Address to Suffolk University

Mr. President, thank you very much. I was a little nervous when you asked that rhetorical question, who among us has not stayed up? And I thought thousands of you would start. Anyway, did you check out the colors? [APPLAUSE] Huh?

Some years ago, many years ago actually, the renowned American novelist James Michener got a phone call one night and the caller said, Mr. Michener, congratulations. Our organization, and he named the organization, has elected you the greatest living American author. And we would like you to come and accept the award, and he mentioned a time and place, and Michener excused himself for a moment to consult his calendar. And then he came back a moment later and said I'm terribly sorry, but I have a pre-existing commitment on that day. And there was a long pause on the other end of the phone and then the caller said, well, can you think of another greatest living American author? [LAUGHTER] And Michener said, sure, he said, what about Mailer or Vonnegut? And the caller said, no, we already tried them, they couldn't make it, either. [LAUGHTER] I don't know who your first and second choices were, but I want you to know how grateful I am to be here [LAUGHTER] [APPLAUSE] with you this afternoon. [APPLAUSE]

And now I'm going to ask the students here to do something before I go on with my remarks. There may be a few of you sitting here who did it entirely on your own. If so, please remain seated. But the rest of you, I would like you to stand up, turn around and just say thank you to all those people out there who made this day possible for you. Please. [APPLAUSE]

It's been more than 14 years, so I suspect that many of you graduating here today have little or no memory of Timothy McVeigh and his friend Terry Nichols, who were arrested in connection with the bombing of the Federal Building in Oklahoma City. A hundred and sixty-eight people died and more than 800 others were injured in that particular terrorist attack. And while the impact of that event has faded in the even greater horror of 9/11, six years later, it was a terrible, terrible event and furthermore, it was homegrown. In those days I was still the managing editor of *Nightline*, and my colleagues and I decided to conduct a town meeting in the tiny community of Decker, Michigan. Terry Nichols' family lived in Decker, and the town had a homegrown militia, so it seemed like a reasonable place to search for some answers, for some sort of rationale. In any event, I thought it might be instructive to tap in to the thoughts and feelings of the people who still lived there at the time. Prior to the town meeting, I spent some time talking to the townspeople who were going to participate. One audience member took me to task for something that I had said about their neighbor, James Nichols, brother to one of the bombers. I had suggested, based on information that another neighbor had given me, that James Nichols had threatened the life of President Clinton. That was not true, said my critic. What Nichols had actually said was that Clinton didn't deserve to live and that somebody ought to kill him. [LAUGHTER] I had to concede that from a strictly technical point of view, Mr. Nichols had not directly threatened the president's life, but that at the very least, his behavior did constitute an example of bad manners. My audience laughed, but I really wasn't kidding.

The lack of civility in our culture these days is no laughing matter. The use of obscenities is now so commonplace in our daily lives that it is simpler to catalogue the places and occasions in which foul language is not acceptable, funerals, services of worship and commencements being the only three that leap immediately to mind. It is easier to

catalogue those than the places in and the occasions on which we routinely accommodate obscenity: the workplace, the marketplace, theaters, movies, television, parking garages, playgrounds, sports arenas. And on those rare occasions where it's still in use, the family dinner table. Even as we are growing increasingly familiar with the ubiquitous presence of foul language in our daily lives, however, we are expected, especially those of you who function in the academic jungle, we are expected to accommodate to the ever-changing demands of political correctness.

If, in other words, I cut someone off in traffic and he accuses me of performing some unnatural act, I'm expected to shrug it off as an example of the general coarsening of the American language. If, on the other hand, he describes me as short, makes reference to my religion, race or sexuality, there may be grounds for a lawsuit. Neither, of course, is an example of acceptable behavior. But what intrigues me is how they coexist and how in the long run sorting them out may have more to do with what kind of a life you will all lead as you move on from this place than recession, inflation or unemployment.

I realize how quaint, even archaic it must seem to some of you to place emphasis on good manners and civility in times as difficult and troubled as our own. Nor do I mean to offer myself up as a positive example. If you had wanted a doer rather than an observer, you shouldn't have invited a journalist here this morning. But the absence of good manners and civility in our daily communion with one another is evidence of a great deal that is wrong with our society. We are undergoing something of a national nervous breakdown. We seek to intimidate rather than communicate.

We shoot and stab each other altogether too much. Violence, after all, being nothing more than an extreme form of communication on the international as well as on the personal level.

It is, in a sense, the ultimate eloquence of the inarticulate; those who lack the words to express themselves will find another medium. That, in turn, would seem to lead to a rather logical conclusion. To the degree that education provides a substitute for more primitive forms of expression, it is in all of our interests to underwrite the best possible system of universal education that we can afford, for our own good. It is not ever something we do for them. It is always something we do for us, which in fact is the underpinning of all good manners. They are little more or less than a commonly accepted code of behavior, constructed to make life together more tolerable.

It is bad form to take something from one another without permission. That would include somebody else's husband, wife, or significant other. It is rude in the extreme to kill someone who is not actually your [life]. It makes sense to be polite to older people, especially members of your own family, if only because when your machinery begins to run down, you will expect the same courtesy. If you are offended when others make fun of customs or traditions meaningful to your culture, it is probably reasonable not to mock theirs.

We each have a slightly different notion of who or what or even if God is. It may be sensible therefore to treat everybody else's notion respectfully so that each of us will be afforded the same courtesy. I'm not talking now about law, about the formal codification of behavior. We have altogether too much of that. What we lack these days are good manners and the distinction is important.

The law is what we turn to when civility breaks down. When we ignore good taste, when we start being rude to one another, when we keep stretching the envelope of acceptable

behavior, then ultimately we are obliged to turn to litigation, to the hired enforcers of the law to resolve our differences, to punish the deviants among us. As general civility diminishes in our culture, we become more dependent on the law. But most of us lack the capacity to understand or interpret the complexities of the law.

If there are those among us who no longer trust their government, it may be due to the difficulty that most of have in reading the fine print. It is becoming increasingly hard to find the connection between our daily lives and the laws that are intended to govern our behavior. We need a simpler code, something that will get us through the normal days and nights of our existence. We need good manners.

It seems archaic when a member of Congress asks whether the gentle lady from Maryland will yield the floor, and yet it is more than a quaint custom. It is a courtesy, which is in itself an acknowledgment of legitimacy. We should treat one another with courtesy and respect, regardless of race or gender, creed or economic standing, not because the law or even the self-appointed enforcers of political correctness demand it, but because it is illogical and even self-destructive to do otherwise.

Unless and until we perceive civility to be in our common interest, our national pendulum will swing wildly between anarchy and authoritarianism. Every murder, every mugging, every rape, every robbery is further evidence of the collapse of civility. But so too is the avalanche of legislation with which we have tried to replace it. I know we can't dispense with our intricate fabric of laws. But think how many of those laws would become irrelevant if we merely treated one another with common courtesy. What I find so appealing about that notion, and the reason that I offer it to you on this important occasion in your lives, is that it lies within the capacity of each of one us to implement it. Just consider it, please. Thank you. [APPLAUSE]