

JUSTICE SANDRA DAY O'CONNOR

Colorado College Commencement Speech
May 31, 1982

“One Step at a Time... and Keep Walking”

Sandra Day O'Connor, Associate Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States, delivered the Commencement Address and receive the degree of Doctor of Laws, honoris causa, at the College's one hundred and first Commencement. Her son, Brian, was a member of the graduating class. The text of Justice O'Connor's address, “One Step at a Time... and Keep Walking,” follows.

“I am thrilled to be with you this morning in this majestic setting and to share with you the sense of exhilaration and freedom which is always present at a graduation ceremony. I realize we are here to applaud those of you who will be receiving degrees. But, as one who has sent a few dollars to various colleges and universities for my own children's education, I suggest that there are several other heroes and heroines here today who should also be recognized and with whom you graduates would be happy to share your glory. I refer, of course, to your parents who made two significant contributions to your presence here today. First, they had the brains which you were lucky enough to inherit, and secondly, they and various benefactors of Colorado College provided the money that you needed to sustain yourselves while you were here. On your behalf, I thank your parents, and I commend you graduates for your good judgment in selecting your parents.

Probably a limited number of people here today have had to prepare a Commencement address. Let me tell you about the experience. There are many challenges which humans must face in a lifetime, but I will put the preparation of a Commencement address high on the list of “life's greatest challenges.”

Why is this so? First, it's difficult because all of you are eager to receive your degrees, to enjoy the freedom which comes with a graduation, and to go to new jobs, new schools, or on a wonderful trip. No one knows this more than I do. Listening to one more lecture before enjoying that freedom is simply not high on your list of priorities. Second, the Commencement speaker is given no topic and is expected to be able to inspire all of the graduates with a stirring speech about nothing at all. I suppose that's why so many lawyers are asked to be Commencement speakers. They're in the habit of talking extensively even when

they have nothing to say. The third reason a Commencement address is particularly difficult for me is personal. What you probably would most like to hear about is why I've decided certain cases as I have or how I would decide certain cases if they came to the Court and, these, of course, are the two things I can't talk to you about.

But the most difficult problem I have in speaking to you today is that my son is among you graduates, and everyone knows a mother just doesn't know what she is talking about.

Thus, despite my pleasure at being with you today, it is with some concern that I address you.

During the period when I was making notes in preparation for my remarks today, I received a letter from the parents of a young man of 20 who committed suicide earlier this month while a student at a fine university. His parents had written me and others hoping that their son's death might have meaning if it would cause people such as me to make some helpful suggestions for other young people. They asked me if I saw something which could be said or done to prepare youth for the wide range of pressures and opportunities in the era of history now breaking, to share my views with them and with young people such as you.

No one, of course, has a magic formula to pass on to our youth to prepare them for what those grieving parents described as the "wide range of pressures and opportunities" in our present world. But as I began to think of what I might have learned in the 32 years since I sat with my college graduating class, when I was as you are now — a young person with a degree but little work experience, with high hopes but little actual know-how — three words come to my mind, three words embodying concepts that may help you as you begin to participate in the mainstream of society.

The first word is "creativity." The single most important thing which keeps people vital and interested in the world about them is their creativity. When that is gone, the will to live goes with it. Of all God's gifts to us, the spark of creativity is one of the most important. You have it now, and must never lose it until you draw your last breath. Creativity, as I use the word now, is the spirit of participation in the *resolution* of our problems, both large and small, and the bringing of our own ideas and efforts into the arenas of life.

How many of you have visited a nursing home or home for the aged and seen the look of hopelessness in the eyes of the residents? Perhaps you read, as I did, about a nursing home in the Midwest where a group of the residents staged a sit-in and actually held an aide captive in the day room until the director agreed to let them participate in discussing and making some of the decisions about how the home would be run. Those residents wanted a chance to use their creativity and to be involved in the processes around them. Use this creativity of yours and, if you want to be a successful leader and a catalyst for happiness and fulfillment, encourage this spirit of creativity in everyone you meet.

Sometimes, people in our country, even young, gifted people like you graduates, at some point develop a sense that government and our society have grown so complex and so large that the individual simply cannot impact on the decisions that affect the country and affect all of us. Let me disabuse you of that notion. My experiences in the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government and in my position on the Supreme Court all point to this conclusion: an informed, reasoned effort by even *one* citizen can have dramatic impact on how someone, like a legislator, will vote and what that legislator will then do to impact on how others will vote and act. When I was in the legislature, *one* individual, sometimes with a direct interest in the matter, sometimes without one, could and would, on certain occasions, persuade me by the facts he had mustered, by the clarity of his explanation, or by his reasoning, to do something which I never would otherwise have done. I have been at many caucuses when a group of legislators was trying to decide what to do, and, time and time again, my fellow senators would refer to the logic or fairness of what one plain, unknown citizen had said.

I have had an opportunity to view this same basic phenomenon from a different perspective in my role as a Supreme Court Justice. A majority of litigants who come before us are people who are essentially unknown, not only to us but even within their own community. Yet, we resolve their problems and, in so doing, resolve the problems of thousands or millions similarly situated.

I might make a similar point about the lawyers that appear before us. Certainly, some of those who appear there are among the most heralded advocates of the land, but most are not. Most are lawyers who have never been before the court before and will never be there again. Many of these lawyers are from small firms and small towns. Yet, some of the best arguments in the 150 or so I have heard have been made by lawyers who could be characterized as “unknowns,” and sometimes the argument of a famed lawyer has failed to live up to his or her reputation.

The essential point of all this is simply to make the same point in a different context.

The individual can make things happen. It is the individual who can bring a tear to my eye and then cause me to take pen in hand. It is the individual who has acted or tried to act who will not only force a decision but be able to impact on that decision.

So I urge you for the rest of your lives to carry this torch of creativity high in whatever world of influence you live. Not only will our country and our community be beneficiaries of such an effort, but so too will you and those around you.

The second of the three key words I urge you to keep before you is the word “work.” Whether your future work is in business, in government, or as a volunteer, try to set your sights on doing something worthwhile and then work hard at it. Theodore Roosevelt said, “Happiness is doing work worth doing,” and he was right. I must admit that sometimes when I told our son that I only wanted him to work around the house so it would make him happy he would inform me that he was happy enough already, and that what our country needed most was conservation of energy, especially his.

As I went through life, I did not aspire to become a member of the Supreme Court. What I did was to establish immediate goals and to do every immediate task I had as well as I thought I could do it. Initially, I just tried to be a good lawyer. When I married and had children, I tried to run a good household and home, and to be as good a wife and a mother as I could be. Later, I did my best as a volunteer, as a state senator, and as a judge.

I discovered something as I went along. There is a real satisfaction in doing something well, whether it is in a profession, as a volunteer, or at home. Moreover, by doing something as well as it can be done, you are more likely to have new opportunities available to you. People take notice when a job is well done. You will have prepared yourself so that as new pathways open, you can take them. Abraham Lincoln once said: “When I was a young boy, I didn’t know what I wanted to do with my life, but I prepared myself for the opportunity that I knew would come my way.” That’s good advice.

The third word I want to mention is “love.” God’s chief commandments to us are to love Him and to love our neighbors as ourselves. The Apostle John tells us why we must do so in his first epistle, but on a day like today I don’t need to tell you about love, as I am sure your hearts are filled with it. You students are filled with love for this school, your friends here, and your parents, and you parents are today justifiably filled with pride and love for your children. I know that, and you know that but, sometime this weekend, you might just want to tell each other that.

It is not my function to preach to you today or to supplement what you have learned in church, but no advice on how to prepare yourselves for the pressures and opportunities you will face would be complete without reminding you that we must care about others, and help others throughout our lives. The main goal each of us should have in life is to help other people. We do this because it brings us pleasure and self-satisfaction. We do this because it is God’s plan for us.

And so I leave you with these words, Decide what is a worthy direction. Then take one step at a time in that direction. Some of those steps will be high and hard. Some will be boring and discouraging, but take each step as well as you can, considering the footing on which you must stand, and then just keep on walking. I have every confidence, if you do this, that you will be able to walk a constructive, meaningful life and that, after all, is why we’re all here.”