

Abby Kelley Foster Charter School Graduation June 4, 2009

Graduates of the class of 2009 of the Abby Kelley Foster Charter School, devoted parents, relatives, and friends.

I am honored to address you today. The last time young people asked me for some advice was when my children graduated from high school in the mid-90's and my grandchildren are too young to know they need grandma's words of wisdom.

Let me first congratulate you on your graduation from Abby Kelley Foster Charter School. This is no small accomplishment. You have completed a rigorous liberal arts curriculum; you've been held to high standards; you have been initiated into a culture that values education; you will all be attending post-secondary institutions. In brief, you have performed admirably.

There are, however, some other very special people who deserve much credit for your accomplishments. They are your parents. It is fitting that we recognize them as well. They gave careful consideration to your education, and by submitting your name to the lottery, provided you with this opportunity. You have been afforded a solid liberal arts education that is not required in the traditional public schools – four years of English, math, science, and history. You have studied Latin and I understand that you have the second largest chapter in the state of the Junior Classical League. You have studied music and art, and I have heard the chorus and orchestra on several occasions, so I know how good they are and how seriously the study of the fine arts is taken at the school. You have learned about the contemporary world, but your horizons are not bounded by it since you have also been exposed to the thought and ways of life of other times and places. You've also been taught what it means to be a citizen of this nation and this community, and the importance of a liberal education to be a thinking participant in a democratic republic.

These are advantages which set you apart from many of your contemporaries who are also graduating from high school. So remember to thank your parents and hug them for giving you this start in life.

It is up to you, however, to take advantage of this opportunity that has been afforded you. The ball is now in your court. America is still the land of opportunity where all things are possible. Waves of immigrants have migrated to this country over several hundred years because they believed in the American dream. Last week, President Obama nominated Sonia Sotomayer for the Supreme Court. She is the daughter of a single Puerto Rican mother and grew up in public housing in the Bronx. Her mother chose to send her to

Cardinal Spellman High School, a Catholic school known for its high standards and rigorous curriculum. Ms. Sotomayer took advantage of that opportunity to go on to Princeton, Yale Law School and a formidable legal career and judgeship. Roots are not an obstacle or an excuse. You all have the same advantage she did – a parent who cared about your education.

So where you go in life and what you do is now up to you. But here I caution you about two tendencies. Some students feel pressured to decide what they want to be when they grow up by age 20. College is so expensive; you have loans to pay back. I assure you that I did not know at 20 that 20 years later I would be founding director of the Worcester Regional Research Bureau. At 20, I didn't even know what a research bureau was, and I had several different careers before finding the right niche. And that is a major advantage of living in the US. Your position in life is not fixed, the economy is fluid and you must remain flexible and open to new kinds of positions and technologies. (Computers were not widely used until the 1970's and the internet became a central part of our lives perhaps a decade ago after Al Gore invented it.) The jobs you will have do not yet exist because you have not invented them.

On the other hand, you should not graduate from college and go home or wander the world for several years to “find yourself.” If you're a diligent, hard working student, you should not find college so stressful that you need another four years to recuperate. You should have some plan after graduation, even if it's temporary, because that's what it means to be an adult – you act responsibly. What you decide to do should be based on your talents and your interests. If you need guidance, seek it from your parents, older siblings and relatives, your professors or others whom you respect. Be wary of media propaganda and politicians trying to influence your decision. In recent months, for example, we've been subject to a constant barrage of attacks on private enterprise and the “greed on Wall Street,” in contrast with the goodness of devoting oneself to the public or non-profit sectors, a cause beyond yourself. What the media papers over is that it was government policy (Community Reinvestment Act) that required banks to write mortgages with 0% down to unworthy creditors. While greed exists in the private sector (it is part of human nature), it exists among public sector employees as well. Many public employee unions have demanded increases in their salaries and pension benefits by making fraudulent claims during these difficult times, and have refused to make sacrifices in order to save the jobs of their co-workers. But in my experience, the overwhelming majority of people I have met, regardless of their place of employment, are decent, honest and hardworking. But they don't make headlines, only the miscreants do.

The point I want to make is this: no job is just about the individual. The motto of the *Wall Street Journal* is “free markets, free people.” Private enterprise enables us to be a free people, to live our lives as we choose within the law. That is the unique contribution of the United States to the world. So private enterprise is the cornerstone of our nation. Without people making money and paying taxes, government programs on which people rely would not exist. The robust defense of our nation and all that we value would not be possible. The wealth generated by the private sector is responsible for the existence of the

non-profit sector. Without private sector generosity, The Research Bureau and all other non-profit organizations like United Way, the YMCA, churches, synagogues, and mosques would cease to exist.

While I am not advising you on a course to pursue, I am suggesting that all jobs, regardless of the sector, contribute to the greater good and to our collective happiness. Choose carefully and responsibly because we have the freedom to do that. Most of the world does not.

Congratulations, good luck, and may God bless you, your families, and your friends.

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