

graduation remarks of justice ann walsh bradley

Justice Ann Walsh Bradley of the Wisconsin Supreme Court spoke at Marquette Law School's commencement ceremony on May 15, 2004. Justice Bradley's remarks follow.

Graduates, Families, Educators, and Friends:
I am honored to be asked to speak to you on this important occasion. I congratulate all the graduates. You have traveled the road from the land of torts to the jungles of the Uniform Commercial Code—and survived. Your ability and hard work have brought you to this important day. On behalf of all of us, I say, “Well done.”

To the educators, let me say that as a former educator, I know some of the trials and tribulations involved in education. But it is on an occasion like this that those of you involved in education know that your work is worthwhile. On behalf of the graduates and their families, I want to say, “Thank you,” to the law school faculty, staff, and administration.

As for the families and friends—I know how you feel. I, too, have been present with my children at graduations and occasions of awards and recognitions. How proud I was. How proud you are.

I know the number of diapers changed, the number of loads of laundry washed, the number of trips to the doctor and dentist, the number of sleepless nights that you have endured over the years to bring these graduates to this ceremony today.

They could not have done this without your emotional and, in most cases, financial support. To the families and friends, I say, “Congratulations. Sit back, be proud, enjoy.”

The usual instructions for commencement speakers are to be erudite, inspirational, humorous and . . . brief. Brevity, I am told, is the most important quality, so brief I shall be.

A commencement such as this is an important event in the lives of the students and their families. It marks both a beginning and an end: the ending to your formal legal education, the beginning of your new life as an attorney.

You might characterize this commencement and your law degree as a ticket out of law school and into your future. I am reminded of an oft-told story about United States Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, who, elderly at the time, was boarding a train in Washington's Union Station. The famous justice could not find his ticket. He searched his pockets in vain. The conductor, who had immediately recognized him, said, “Don't worry, Justice Holmes, come aboard. I know that when you find your ticket you'll mail it to the railroad.”

“Mr. Conductor,” Holmes quietly responded, “the question isn't, ‘Where's my ticket?,’ but rather, ‘Where am I supposed to be going?’”

The questions of where am I supposed to be going, what am I supposed to be doing with this law degree, are lifelong questions. Let me suggest that a beacon has been in your midst, lighting the way for your journey.

The person of whom I speak is former Marquette Law School dean, Howard Eisenberg. Howard died unexpectedly on June 4, 2002.

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Dean Eisenberg taught us that the direction to go is forward. To listen to others. To have a vision and work hard to make that vision a reality. Through the example of his life and through his writings, he has given direction.

On the occasion of the thirtieth anniversary of his admission to the bar, Howard opined upon what it takes to be a good lawyer. After reflecting upon his professional experiences,



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he emphasized the importance of character. “What do I mean by character?” he asked. The answer he gave: character in our profession means honesty, judgment, and courage.

This evening I will focus on the last of those three qualities, courage. My message—Dean Eisenberg’s message to you—is that you be people of courage in the legal profession.

Dean Eisenberg wrote this: “A lawyer must be courageous. A lawyer must have the guts to tell people things they don’t want to hear; make decisions that will upset people; take positions that are unpopular; and assert claims and positions before hostile tribunals.”

So what does it mean today to be people of courage in your legal careers? I think that courage is a mindset, an approach to life. For those in the legal profession, it can mean:

1. That when you’re putting together a deal for clients and there is the wink and nod, you have the courage to say that, yes, you will be an aggressive advocate but will not shade the truth.
2. That you have the courage to embrace unpopular causes and to stand up for the victims, the poor, and the powerless in our communities.
3. That you have the courage to join in the public debate when an independent judiciary is being threatened. That you make sure that the voices that speak thoughtfully about the role of courts and the rule of law are not silent.

Courage means standing tall . . . and having your voice heard.

In preparing for my address this evening, I reviewed the 2002 special issue of the *Marquette Law Review* which was inspired by your current dean, Dean Kearney. As a colleague and friend, Dean Kearney collected a remarkable array of essays written in tribute to Howard Eisenberg and dedicated the special issue of the law review to him. He included in the collection several of Howard’s own writings, one of which was an address that Dean Eisenberg gave in 1999 at Marquette, entitled “What’s a Nice Jewish Boy Like Me Doing in a Place Like This?”

In that address, he spoke of courage, saying this:

“There is a great need in our society for people who have the courage to say that the Emperor is naked, and not only is he naked, he is also not very honest. Some things are considered ‘politically correct’ which are morally wrong or intellectually foolish. Neither Abraham, Moses, Jesus Christ, nor St. Ignatius was politically correct. None of those men were apologists for the status quo.”

He went on to say, “It is necessary—essential—to take moral stands and stick to them in the face of those who favor political convenience, relative truth, or a least-common-denominator code of ethics.”

Dean Eisenberg was right. I think that courage is the price that life demands for being at peace with yourself. It requires you to come to grips with who you are as a person and with what you value. In my experience, it is also a defining virtue of all truly great lawyers.

Remember, your diploma is not a mere piece of paper. It is an instrument for doing justice.

Graduates, let your voices be heard to protect and perfect our rights and responsibilities under the law.

All of you new graduates are talented people. All of you are bright people, or you would not be here today. My challenge and Dean Eisenberg’s challenge to all of you, as you embark upon this next stage of your life, is that you also be people of courage.

You will recognize my closing words to you also as Howard’s: “Do well and do good.” •