



1

1

WAYNE STATE UNIVERSITY

2

3

LAW SCHOOL COMMENCEMENT

4

5

MASONIC TEMPLE

6

7

MAY 16, 1998

8

9

10

COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS

11

12

HON. JANET RENO

13

14

ATTORNEY GENERAL OF THE UNITED STATES

15

16

17

18

19

20

21

22

23

24

1 Dean Robinson, there's only one person
2 that hopes it more than you do, and that's me. I
3 can't wait. To the class of 1998, I bring you a
4 message: I love the law after 35 years of
5 practice, and I love good lawyers, and after five
6 years as Attorney General of the United States, I
7 can tell you that there are wonderful lawyers
8 across this land doing great work for the people
9 they serve. You enter a profession that is
10 magnificent, that does so much, but that -- as
11 always -- we can work together to improve.

12 You take so much from this great law
13 school. I have had the chance to talk with some
14 of your colleagues, and the combinations of
15 idealism, of good sense, of interest in the law
16 is so wonderful and so refreshing. You will have
17 friends that you made here who will last you all
18 lifetime. You will tell stories, as I did
19 just the other day, about two of my
20 faculty members at law school. I remember them as
21 vividly as if I saw them yesterday. You will
22 be influenced all of your life and in your
23 professional career by concepts and theories of
24 the law that you learned here at Wayne State.

25 Use it. Use all these wonderful

1 attributes that you have obtained here. I urge
2 you at some point in your professional career to
3 consider public service. I have had people tell
4 me of late, why would anybody think about public
5 service? All
6 you do is get fussed at, cussed at, and
7 figuratively beaten up around the ears. I will
8 tell you that
9 there is nothing so worthwhile as trying to use
10 the law to make things better for other people.

11 You need not do it all for a career, but

12 you will find it a very refreshing change from
13 charging people to protect their rights. You may
14 be
15 a real estate lawyer or a trial lawyer. You may
16 have a small family practice. There are so
17 many other fruitful paths a law graduate can
18 follow, for I believe that a good legal education
19 does more than just produce good lawyers. It
20 also builds good citizens; men and women who work
21 harder, think more clearly, communicate more
22 effectively, analyze diverse viewpoints,
23 negotiate productively, spot and solve problems,
24 and apply their hard-won discipline to any field
25 that they chose.

1 I thought the other day about
2 what lawyers have done that I am aware of.
3 They've helped lead Fortune 500 corporations.
4 They are entrepreneurs, like the founders of
5 Southwest Airlines and David's Cookies. They
6 teach law, English and kindergarten. They found
7 and direct advocacy associations and humane
8 societies, charities and investment banks. They
9 write novels and screen plays. They are dancers
10 and disc jockeys, sculptors and restaurateurs,
11 ministers and parents, and one I know of even
12 raises llamas.

13 And if this is not enough, Tony
14 Lorissa, who managed the Oakland A's to a world
15 championship in 1989 is also a lawyer. He didn't
16 have to wear a tie. He didn't have to win every
17 day. He can yell at the judges and he gets all
18 the hot dogs he wants free.

19 But wherever you go and whatever you do
20 with the wonderful education that you have
21 received here at Wayne State, you will be
22 confronted by the issue that challenges us all:
23 how the diverse people of this earth live
24 together in peace and prosperity, first
25 maintaining proud cultural and racial heritages,

1 while eliminating prejudice, ensuring liberty and
2 justice for all without imposing unnecessary
3 restraints, and using this earth and the universe
4 that we love so that we leave it in better shape
5 for our children than in the manner we received
6 it.

7 Lawyers are better equipped, I think,
8 and clearly from my limited experience today the
9 lawyers of Wayne State are better equipped to
10 deal with this issue and these challenges than
11 any other discipline that I know. I think
12 lawyers, wherever they go, and whatever they do,

13 have three essential functions:

14 First of all, they are a sword and a
15 shield, the advocate and the protector; second,
16 the lawyer should be a problem solver, a function
17 we sometimes neglect; and third, the lawyer can
18 be a powerful, powerful peacemaker. But as we
19 consider the functions of the law, I urge you to
20 look beyond the law, to look beyond your narrow
21 specialty.

22 One of the problems the world faces
23 today is that we all attempt to solve problems
24 from a specialized point of view, and we
25 sometimes don't have the glue that brings the

1 specialized points of view together to provide
2 the solution to some of the more difficult issues
3 confronting this nation.

4 I would like to address with you today
5 two issues that you will confront, whether you're
6 the manager of the Los Angeles Dodgers or whether
7 you raise llamas or whether you're a senior
8 partner in a Detroit law firm. The first issue
9 that I think it is imperative for lawyers to
10 address is how do we make the law real for all
11 Americans? How do we provide access to law, to
12 justice, and to the courts for every single
13 American?

14 Now, many people will say that's not my
15 problem, but I submit to you that it is every
16 lawyers' problem. On the wall of the justice
17 building in Washington there is an inscription
18 that says: The common law is derived from the
19 will of mankind, issuing from the people, framed
20 by mutual confidence, and sanctioned by the light
21 of reason.

22 If the common law issues from only some
23 of the people, and not all of the people, the law
24 will not be lasting. If some of the people feel
25 they do not have access to our institutions, they

1 will become disenfranchised and bitter. The
2 strength of this nation will be impaired. This
3 nation is strong if all, not some of its
4 people, are strong.

5 If this nation is to be based upon the
6 foundation of law, then all of its people must
7 have access.

8 First, wherever you go, and whatever
9 you do with the practice of law, I urge you to
10 become a spokesman to ensure that all Americans
11 when charged with a crime, regardless of their
12 ability to afford it, have competent, able
13 defense. I have seen too many cases in review in

14 these last five years where through DNA testing,
15 or some other means, we have proved that a person
16 convicted of a crime was wrongfully convicted.

17 One person is one person too many.

18 But don't be satisfied just with
19 protecting the innocent. When you represent the
20 guilty person, remember that when you get them
21 off
22 on a motion to dismiss or a motion to suppress,
23 and yet you haven't solved the problem that got
24 them there in the first place, you're not doing
25 the best job possible as a lawyer. If it's a

1 crack addiction that's caused this crime, let us
2 all try to work together to make sure that
3 everybody has treatment available when they need
4 it to solve the ultimate problem that causes the
5 crime. Let us be the problem solver in the
6 situation too.

7 I urge you to promote legal services
8 programs wherever you can, and engage in pro bono
9 efforts. It is so rewarding. But you can have a
10 choice. You can be the problem solver or just
11 the advocate. The advocate will take one case
12 against one landlord involving one unit and feel
13 that they may have won the battle when they get a
14 court order directing him to make some repairs.

15 Those repairs may be jury rigged and your client
16 may be back before you in six months.

17 But you could be creative. You could
18 talk with the landlord and find that he is in
19 despair because his property values have been
20 reduced by the crack dealers down the corner. He
21 can't get anybody to stay there. He doesn't have
22 enough money to repair it. You can begin by
23 going to look at the whole neighborhood and
24 involve people from your firm and others that you
25 know. You can learn about community development

1 block grants. You can work

2 with Habitat for Humanity to plan a
3 neighborhood-wide effort at rehabbing and
4 rebuilding a neighborhood.

5 You can involve municipal government by
6 calling on public officials to determine what can
7 be done in terms of municipal services. You can
8 work together with the citizens in that
9 neighborhood to create a sense of advocacy where
10 they can speak for themselves. You can be a
11 problem solver and have a far greater impact.

12 Mr. President, one of the points that I
13 think we should investigate is how we prepare
14 people to be community advocates. Too many of us

15 have gone to law school and don't know just how
16 to get rid of that vacant lot that's overgrown or
17 how to get rid of the car on the vacant lot or
18 how to deal with the municipality; whereas, if we
19 had a four-year degree at Wayne State in
20 community advocacy, with an internship in a
21 municipality or a local government, wherein
22 people learned how to make things work for
23 people, we could do so much.

24 That community advocate could be
25 licensed from their law firm or licensed by

10

1 themselves. They wouldn't anticipate making as

2 much as a lawyer, but they could make an adequate
3 living and they could do so much in terms of
4 service. We have got to be bold as we look to
5 see how we can make the law real, not just for
6 some Americans, but for all Americans.

7 We've got to look at issues such as
8 child support. When I first started practicing
9 law, a lady came to me to collect child support.
10 I quoted her a fee. She was aghast and she said:
11 "how can you expect me to pay a fee? I don't even
12 have child support. I don't even have money for
13 rent." I felt then the inadequacy of the law.
14 Now we are slowly building a framework of child
15 support enforcement in this country that can make

16 a difference. We should look to our areas of the
17 law where systems can improve on the delivery of
18 services.

19 But I go now to the second point. We
20 all have an obligation wherever we go and
21 whatever we do with the law to build community
22 and a sense of community around an America that too
23 often feels isolated, alone, and rootless, a
24 mobile America, a America that does not have a
25 sense too often of family or community.

11

1 Now, some of you may again say that's
2 not my problem, but I suggest to you that it

3 is all our problem. Recently I was in
4 Jacksonville
5 to consider the implementation of a comprehensive
6 strategy in dealing with the programs to end
7 youth violence. The man responsible for this
8 project? A real estate lawyer. A real estate
9 lawyer who saw
10 that his city could not grow unless he made an
11 early investment in that city.

12 If you become prominent in your
13 community, your strength of your practice, the
14 strength of your clients' businesses will be no
15 more than the strength of the community that

16 backs them up. We must look at the whole
17 picture, not just parts and pieces. We can talk
18 about economic development, but unless we make an
19 investment early on in our children, in the
20 building blocks that produce strong and positive
21 futures for our children, we will never, ever
22 begin to stem the tide of youth violence or
23 create people with the skills necessary to fill
24 the jobs to maintain this nation as a first-rate
25 nation.

12

1 You say what do I know about it? Use
2 the great skills and the learning that you've

3 acquired here at Wayne State to go to your
4 community and say: What are we doing to ensure
5 proper preventative medical care for our children
6 who cannot represent themselves, proper child
7 care for our children who are more alone and
8 unsupervised than at any time in our history,
9 quality education so that teachers begin to talk
10 about salaries that may not ever match, but
11 somehow compare to football players who make in
12 the six-digit figures? Let us build the blocks
13 of human existence so that our people can become
14 self-sufficient. The place where we begin? With
15 family.

16 I remember my afternoons and evenings

17 and summertimes. My mother worked in the home.
18 She taught us to play baseball and to appreciate
19 Beethoven's symphonies, to bake a cake and to
20 play fair. She punished us and she loved us with
21 all her heart, and no child care in the world
22 will ever be a substitute for what that lady was
23 in our life.

24 As you seek professional opportunities,
25 ask those people from whom you seek such

13

1 opportunities: What are you doing? What will
2 you do to allow me to spend quality time with my
3 children? They will grow up before you know it,

4 and yet, if you have that quality time, it will
5 be some of the most rewarding for them and for
6 you that you can imagine.

7 The second point that you must engage
8 in if you are to participate in the community is
9 to speak out against hatred and bigotry. Haters
10 are cowards, and when confronted, they most often
11 back down, but too often we let the hate go on
12 saying it's not my problem.

13 In 1951, six years after World War II,
14 I spent a year in Germany. I asked the wonderful
15 people I met how could Hitler come to power? The
16 answer was: It just happened. In your

17 community, in your nation, you as lawyers have a
18 special opportunity and a special challenge to
19 speak out against discrimination, against
20 bigotry, against hatred, and to use your
21 peace-making powers to bring people together to
22 resolve conflict, to help people understand how
23 to live together, to appreciate the diversity of
24 this nation, the wonderful heritages, the
25 wonderful backgrounds, and to help people

14

1 understand.

2 Young people can do that better than
3 most people. I was recently at a law school at

4 a panel, and I have heard more wisdom from those
5 students than I've heard from an awful lot of
6 people in a long time. Never underestimate what
7 you can do at 24 and 25 and 30 and 35. You don't
8 have to be an old gray-haired lady to make a
9 difference.

10 Think of what you can do in terms of
11 community justice. Courts are often times remote
12 and people don't understand them, but if people
13 are involved in the justice system, they come to
14 appreciate it. There are initiatives across this
15 country underway that are bringing neighborhoods
16 and courts and community police officers and
17 public defenders and prosecutors together in

18 neighborhood situations in which community
19 problems are being addressed in a constructive
20 and thoughtful way.

21 But you face challenges as we build
22 communities. I will be a little old lady sitting
23 on my front porch as you deal with the issues of
24 tomorrow, of how we understand and deal with the
25 fact that the crime will become international in

15

1 its scope and international in its impact.

2 When a man can sit in his kitchen in St.

3 Petersburg, Russia, and with his computer steal

4 from a bank in New York, you understand that as

5 we focus on our community, we must focus on it in
6 relation to all the world. How we bring justice
7 around the world will be a challenge for us all.
8 How we use modern technology to educate, to
9 communicate, to build positive futures, rather
10 than to invade privacy, to gather information
11 that can undermine our sense of community.

12 For these last five years, I have
13 traveled across this nation talking with Indian
14 tribes, with people in the innercities, with law
15 students, with congressmen, with governors, with
16 citizens, some who care and some who don't, but
17 after these five years, I have never believed so

18 profoundly in the future of this nation and the
19 strength of this nation and in the caring of this
20 nation.

21 As I talk with young people, they have
22 a sense of purpose, an optimism, an idealism
23 tempered with the realities of what they've
24 learned in law school. I think the world and
25 this nation will be in good hands with you, and I

16

1 wish you Godspeed and great success.

2

3

4