You know, John mentioned that approval rating. My wife says I’m just an overpriced stock and I only have one place to go, and that’s down. Well, good afternoon. Let me just say first of all how honored I am to be here today to celebrate with the class of 2015 their graduation from this outstanding institution.

Well, I may not have a lot of direct experience with Suffolk University. Having spent a good part of my life in public service here in the Commonwealth of Mass. at both the state and local levels, I've come across more than my fair share of Suffolk University graduates. One of the reasons I agreed to take this opportunity to speak before the graduating class today was because Suffolk University, over the years, has done a wonderful job of contributing many leaders to state and local government here in the commonwealth. You can clap for that one. And as somebody who appreciates and believes in the difference that public service can make, I find Suffolk to be one of the true crown jewels in the commonwealth’s constellation of higher education institutions.

I would also add to that that Suffolk has contributed to the Commonwealth of Mass. in another way that may not be known by that many people who are at Suffolk. One of the things I learned when I joined state government and went up to Beacon Hill and spent time in the State House was the State House doesn’t have Wi-Fi. The State House doesn’t have Wi-Fi. And we are in the process of working with the legislature to install it. But one of the things that came up during my conversations with several members of the legislature about it, well, I said to them, so, what do you guys do? And they said, we borrow it from Suffolk. So, I want to thank Suffolk. I want to thank Suffolk for providing that unique service to the members of the legislature, free of charge. But it speaks to some extent as to how many members of state government got the password when they were students at Suffolk.

I would also like to say that Kristen Lepore, who’s the secretary of administration and finance and the chief financial officer for the commonwealth, is a Suffolk grad. She graduated from both the undergraduate school and the business school. Dan Bennett, who’s the secretary of public safety, graduated from the Suffolk Law School. And Carlo Basile, former state rep and currently my chief secretary, who couldn’t be here today, which is a shame, because he’s the first member of his family to graduate from college, is a graduate and a member of the class of 2015. And I want to congratulate all of you for all you’ve done to get to where you are today. And I certainly hope many of you remember that it’s not the destination, but the journey that matters most of all.
Now, true confessions. I've been to three of my own graduations in my life. My high school graduation, my college graduation, and my business school graduation. I have no idea who spoke at my high school graduation. German Chancellor Helmut Kohl spoke at my college graduation. I have no idea what he said. And General Motors CEO Roger Smith spoke at my business school graduation. I don’t remember what he said either. So, I recognize the extremely high bar that I have to climb over today to say something worthwhile to all of you that might be worth remembering.

So, I’m going to pile on the advice you’ve probably gotten over the course of the past few weeks and try and make three simple points. Be constructive, be positive, and try to focus on what works instead of on what doesn’t.

I had a meeting a few years ago with a friend of mine who’s a community activist to talk about his community. And he went on and on and on and on about all the things that weren’t working in his community. I dutifully took notes, and I asked questions, and after about an hour of this, I finally put my pen down and I looked at him and I said, tell me about something that’s working in your community. And a very awkward silence followed. Kind of like this. But it lasted for about two minutes as the two of us just kind of stared at each other. I finally broke it by looking at him and said, you live there, you’ve lived there for most of your life. Come on, tell me about something that’s working. He couldn’t do it. To this day, it remains one of the most illuminating meetings I've ever had.

It’s relatively easy to let the stuff that isn’t working weight you down. Family, exams, classes, friends, social life, social media, politics. And sometimes the forest really does disappear through the trees. Force yourselves to see beyond them. The fact that you are here today means when you choose to do so, you have the ability to see the forest and the big picture. Don’t forget that because in the end, it is a choice. I’m not saying ignorance is bliss, or that anyone should go through life willfully blind to whatever trials and tribulations exist around you. What I am saying is you have a choice about how you deal with it. And that choice belongs to you.

You know, I ran twice for governor. I ran in 2010, and I lost to former Governor Deval Patrick. That hurt. No doubt about it. But I got a phone call shortly after the election that provided me with a bit of perspective. A young man called me up and said he was organizing the Boston location of a national robotics competition that would take place a few weeks later at the Agganis Arena at Boston University. And he asked me if I would come speak to the teams that were participating in the contest before they kicked it off in the morning. I thought about it for a minute and I said sure, what do you want me to talk about? He paused for a minute, and then he said, I want you to talk about why it’s okay to fail. And my initial reaction was you are so lucky you’re not standing in front of me. Then I thought, you know, you’ve got guts. And I thought about it some more and decided that was actually a pretty good idea. Because most people in life,
most successful people in life, they do fail. Abraham Lincoln lost more elections than he won. J.K. Rowling, who introduced millions of people to the world of Harry Potter and captivated young and old alike with her multilayered stories about good and evil, had more than a few wrong turns in her way to becoming a cult hero.

We live in a time of 140 characters, where we tend to oversimplify almost every story, to make it fit into some short, clean narrative. But as you know by now, life is much messier than that. The twists and turns along the way are what teach us stuff we never knew about life, about our jobs, our friends, and ourselves. And they give us a chance to grow in two directions. Embrace the chance to learn from your mistakes, and you grow up. Miss that chance, and you grow old before your time.

My wife, 27 years we’ve been married, is the most positive person I know. She lights up a room whenever she’s in it. And as a result, she’s raised, with a little help from me, three kids who can see the bright side of almost anything. I marvel at their optimism, but I also know that it’s their faith in themselves and their future that drives them to succeed, to overcome, and to improve. And I’ve watched them fight their way through troubled waters, shake off disappointments, and challenge themselves in ways that make me proud. They are comfortable with being uncomfortable. And as their dad, I cherish that most of all. Because life, especially if you reach for the most, will make you uncomfortable.

Now, like most of us, hopefully all of us, I love my mom and dad. They raised my brothers and me. They raised my brothers and me and taught us to believe in ourselves, and I’ve never met two kinder people. They would hear us out on anything, but they had no time for whining or self-pity. They raised us to play the hand, whatever the cards, with optimism and grace. About 10 years ago, my mom got diagnosed with Alzheimer’s, and I had a chance to watch my parents play the hand. For those of you who aren’t familiar with it, Alzheimer’s is a very cruel disease. Over time, usually years, it robs you of your memory, your awareness, your capacity to process information, and your ability to make decisions. It steals the very essence of who you are. And because it doesn’t happen all at once, you fade in and out of periods of lucidity, at least in the early years when you know what’s going on, but are pretty much powerless to do anything about it.

When my mom faded in, she never complained. She would tell us how much she appreciated those moments with us and with our kids, and how much she loved the extended time she had with my dad. Mostly, she was embarrassed about her inability to do the things she used to do with ease. And then she would fade out. And over time, the time she was with us got shorter, and the time she was not would expand. My dad, he never complained either. He always said she took care of us, now we take care of her. And he was glad to do it. Now, eventually, she needed round-the-clock care, so they moved into a continuing care facility where my mom lives in the
nursing home on one side of the driveway. My dad lives in the independent living facility on the other. And he visits with her every day. They showed us a grace, an optimism and a dignity late in life that demonstrated to all of us that they could still play the hand, even when the cards were cruel and unrelenting.

Be constructive. Be positive. Focus on what works. There are a million clichés out there, and they all say the same thing. Don’t let the turkeys get you down. When the going gets tough, the tough get going. Adversity doesn’t build character, it reveals it. And blah blah blah blah blah blah blah. It’s probably what a lot of you have heard from me today.

Now, I’m sure some of you have heard of tennis legend, Arthur Ashe. He was one of my heroes as a kid back in the ‘60s and ‘70s. He was the first African American selected to play on the United States Davis Cup tennis team, and to this day, he’s the only black man ever to win the singles title at Wimbledon, the U.S. Open, and the Australian Open, three of the big four in professional tennis. He suffered a heart attack in the 1980s and before anybody really knew much about HIV or AIDS, he contracted HIV from a blood transfusion. He didn’t whine, he didn’t complain. He didn’t pity what had happened to him. Instead, he became a very public spokesman about living with HIV and the importance of cleaning up the blood supply. And this was at a point in time when very few people were willing to discuss this issue at all. He died in 1993, before many of you were born, at the ripe old age of 50. After he died, he received and deserved the Presidential Medal of Freedom from former President Bill Clinton. Arthur Ashe had a very simple saying about life: Start where you are, use what you have, do what you can. Words to live by from the man who embodied that graceful, forward-looking, purposeful approach to his own life every single day.

You start today as graduates of a terrific institution. Make the most of what you’ve got. Do what you can. Be constructive. Be positive. And most important of all, focus on what works. God bless you all and good luck to the class of 2015.