

**Suffolk University College of Arts & Sciences Commencement  
Sunday, May 20, 2018  
Blue Hills Bank Pavilion, Boston  
Commencement Speaker  
Timothy Phillips  
Founder and CEO  
Beyond Conflict**

Good afternoon, and I have to say thank you for this not only incredible honor, but an opportunity to lose 10 pounds in this outfit.

It's a great privilege to be here this afternoon to honor the graduating Class of 2018, to give this year's commencement address, and to receive this honorary degree. I have to say that I never imagined when I graduated 35 years ago that I would be standing here today as your commencement speaker. And to be honest, if the faculty behind me had looked at my grades, they might have had second thoughts. But it's too late.

I want to thank President Kelly, Provost Royo, Dean Toyoda, Board Chair Bob Lamb, the parents and families gathered here to celebrate you, the graduates, and for Professor Ben-Josef Hirsch for that very kind and generous introduction. Maybe it's the Irish in me, but that description sounds like somebody I ought to get to know.

As Michal mentioned, I've spent the last 30 years of my life working around the world through an organization I founded, Beyond Conflict, supporting leaders at all levels of society who are seeking to transform their nations from conflict to peace or from dictatorship to democracy. I've met some amazing people along the way who put their lives, their beliefs, and their deepest fears on the line to achieve peace with their enemies and to find ways to reconcile and find forgiveness in the aftermath of war and repression. I have witnessed firsthand some incredible acts of courage and leadership and learned powerful lessons along that journey.

From South Africa with a black majority population suffered for decades under the brutal dictatorship of apartheid, I learned the powerful lesson from leaders of the anti-apartheid movement that it's important to be hard on the system and not the person. That it was essential to focus one's anger and outrage on the systems and structures of oppression and discrimination, and not people. A lesson we need to hear and comprehend in this country. When Nelson Mandela was preparing his speech to the world as he was coming out of prison in 1990, he inserted into the draft speech the words about the then apartheid president, F.W. de Klerk, that he is an honorable man. When his aides asked, how could you say that about a man who helped keep you in prison for 27 years, Mandela responded, it's up to him to disprove it.

From Northern Ireland where a brutal civil war lasted 30 years or eight centuries, depending on which side you were on, I learned that peace can come to a deeply divided society when opposing sides realize that they could only protect what is sacred to them, their families, their religion, and their identities as either Irish or British when they respected and understood what was sacred to those around them.

But the most important lesson I learned from individuals across the world, from every level of society, that transcended geography, race, ethnicity, and class, was that exclusion – the experience of being marginalized, humiliated and treated with disrespect for who you are as an individual or as a group – was and remains the biggest driver of conflict in the world.

A close friend of mine from Northern Ireland, David Ervine, who served a decade in prison for paramilitary activities during The Troubles, as they were called, told a group of Bosnian leaders who were working to overcome their own ethnic strife that terrorists have to come from somewhere and injustice and humiliation are powerful places to come from.

As I did this work over the years and witnessed the same experience in country after country, I came to realize that my capacity to engage, to intuitively connect with, to understand and empathize with the struggles of diverse individuals around the world was shaped here in Boston. Growing up in this city, I met people who were afraid, uncertain, fearful of change and the unknown, and I recognized that I knew what that felt like. I experienced that here in Boston in my neighborhood, in our city as both a child and teenager. I came of age during the school integration or busing crisis of the mid-1970s and saw anger, fear, and outrage lead decent individuals to turn against their neighbors and level the sort of violence and vitriol that I later witnessed in Bosnia and the Middle East. But I also saw people transcend that fear of the unknown and show that change – real, lasting and transformative change – was possible and achievable, and I saw that here in Boston. In working around the world, I came to realize that what these people experienced and what they wanted was no different than what we want here in Boston or in every city, community, and nation represented here today. To be treated with respect, dignity, and to be acknowledged in the world as we see ourselves and not necessarily as others see us.

When I look at what's happening here in the United States and in this city, the city I love and I call home, I realize there's much we can learn from others around the world because they are very much like us. We can overcome profound difference and division. We can imagine a better and different future, and we can find a way to work together to renew the nation and the social bonds that ultimately connect us all. My organization is now beginning to work here in Boston to address racism and broader social inclusion, exclusion, and more broadly in the United States, to try and bridge the partisan divide. We are bringing in leaders from around the world to help us

navigate our profound and deep challenges and to share their experiences as I encourage them to do around the world.

We are also working with neuroscientists at MIT and Harvard, those two schools down the river somewhere, to explore the human brain and understand the brain's building blocks of empathy, fear, and the real capacity we have to rewire our brains to live healthier and fuller lives. We have also been working with scientists and community leaders to apply insights on the behavioral sciences to frame new approaches to racism, exclusion, and to better understand our capacity for collective blame that leads us to automatically blame and fear whole communities who are different from us.

But let's be clear. We are facing serious and real challenges here at home. Racism does exist in Boston in subtle and not-so-subtle ways. Demonization and dehumanization of individuals across the partisan and cultural divide is growing in this country. What used to be strongly felt in vigorous debate is now a contest between good and evil. The scientists we are working with are seeking to better understand this divide and to uncover the cognitive and emotional roots of polarization. Their initial research shows a divide growing between Democrats and Republicans that's similar to the profound divide we see today between Israelis and Palestinians and Shias and Sunnis in the Middle East. The shining beacon of tolerance, equality, and opportunity that we promised to ourselves and promoted to the world is under profound stress and at great risk. We must find ways to address these real and present challenges, and we have to do this together, or we will fail as a community and nation.

As I think about my 30 years of work around the world, I realize in some deep and profound way, it was in preparation to come back home where it all started, to the city that showed me what exclusion feels like, but also a city of hope, of courage, and of possibilities. As graduates of this wonderful institution, you have been given a home not just for the four years you studied here, but forever.

The lessons I learned at Suffolk long ago remain with me even after I forget the questions on the exam or the name of some obscure figure of history. Take what you know from your life experience that no school can or needs to show you – what it is to be fully alive, present and included in the world on your terms. Live your life and treat others the way you want to be treated, with respect, dignity, and with inclusion.

Research in behavioral science shows that we don't automatically see others as we see ourselves. We think in groups and we think automatically, and we think unconsciously. But research also shows that empathy, the ability to step into the mind and feelings of another person is contingent upon context. It happens unconsciously in milliseconds upon something you understand, that you feel, that you experienced, and you need. If we see each other through that lens, through the

awareness of what we want as humans, that each of us, no matter what our calling, can be an agent of change and healing in this world.

Suffolk gave me, this insecure, uncertain, and first-generation college student, an intellectual home, a place to feel seen, heard, and acknowledged. That sense of belonging and community gave me the foundation for the work I did in the years to follow.

If you take anything from today, beyond the fact that you could be a lousy student and come back as a commencement speaker, is to remember that positive change is possible in this world and in your lives. The human capacity for transformation is real, and you can make a truly meaningful difference in this world.

I wish you the very best. We all have great expectations for you because our future depends on you. Thank you.