

Suffolk University College of Arts & Sciences Commencement

Saturday, May 22, 2021

Fenway Park

Commencement Speaker

Martin (Marty) Baron

Former Washington Post Editor

Chairman Lamb, President Kelly, Dean Toyoda, Provost Sandell, and Professor St. Amand, thank you all very much for inviting me back to Boston. And thank you to all of the graduates for inviting me back to Boston to be with you on this glorious day and in this spectacular setting.

Fenway is a hallowed arena of achievement and joy and common purpose. Those are the very subjects I want to discuss with you today. But first things first: Deepest congratulations to all of the graduates on your achievements. As your achievements are recognized in this ceremony, you can look back with justifiable pride, because you have worked hard to reach this day. And you can look forward with hopeful anticipation towards a fulfilling life.

Congratulations as well to all the family and friends who are here, physically or in spirit, to celebrate with you. Throughout your years at Suffolk University, they have been by your side supporting you. We owe them our gratitude for all they have done to contribute to your success. Please give them a round of applause.

My own graduation from university was 45 years ago. Memories are a little faint now. But I do remember something clearly. I was eager to get on with my life. I had a fantastic time in college. I had made many friends. I had learned a ton. And yet, I was itching to move on. I was intensely focused on myself, my job, my income, my expenses, my living arrangements. The universe of my mind was sharply constrained, and I was at the center of it. Like most of my classmates, I was overwhelmingly absorbed with self.

A few months ago I retired from full-time employment. And as I made my exit from The Washington Post, after eight years as its top editor, my thoughts veered far from those that occupied me on the day I picked up my college degrees.

I communicated what I was thinking in a note to my colleagues announcing that I would step away from leadership of that storied newsroom, one that over decades had changed the course of history. Working at the Post, I told my colleagues, allows each of us to serve a purpose bigger

than ourselves. The mission of The Washington Post was the purpose I had found beyond myself. So was the mission of every other place I had worked, in Boston, Miami, New York, and Los Angeles.

Like my newsroom colleagues, I found purpose in giving citizens of a democracy the information they need and deserve to know. Found purpose in journalism that was honest, honorable, rigorous, and unflinching...found purpose in holding power to account as our Founders intended when they crafted the First Amendment.

Working in those newsrooms was, for me, not merely a job. It was a calling. And I was grateful for how those institutions gave form to my professional growth and entrusted me with their reputations.

Those newsrooms were more than a random collection of individuals working under one roof. We shared a common ethic. Each of us was expected to act first and foremost not in service of our own self-interest, but rather in service of the longstanding values and principles of the institution as a whole.

The paycheck came with a duty. Wherever we were, whatever we were doing, on the clock or off, we were to keep this idea in mind. Make the institution stronger, build it up, do nothing to weaken it, do nothing to cause it embarrassment.

We live now in a time when people are intensely focused on their own identities as individuals. Me, I, my feelings, my life experience, my personal brand.

So what, you might ask, became of that individual identity for each of us while working for an institution that asked us to subordinate our individual interests to the collective interests of the institution? We never gave up our individuality, our personality, our soul. Of course, we didn't.

Our individuality was our contribution to the interests of the group. Each of us had something unique and special and highly valuable to offer. But we were part of a team, just like the teams that play here in Fenway.

No one person's individuality, no one person's individual interests took precedence over the interests of the team overall. We worked together in pursuit of a purpose greater than ourselves. And in that way, we gained power, the power to accomplish what none of us could do alone.

I'll give an example from almost 20 years ago right here in Boston. The Boston Globe, with coverage that began in January of 2002, disclosed a decades-long coverup of sexual abuse by clergy and the Catholic Church in this region and beyond. That investigation had an enduring impact, within the Church, around the country, and worldwide. And it transformed how allegations of sexual abuse were handled in other cases since, whether at Penn State, or in the Boy Scouts.

The Globe could do all that because it was a strong institution. It had the capacity to launch months of investigation. It could assemble a team of journalists known for their skill, drive, collaboration, integrity, credibility, and serious work. The Globe had the resources to fight the Church in court for internal documents, allowing it to reveal how the bishops had betrayed the most devout parishioners and the very values of the faith.

I witnessed the power of a strong institution more recently in the nation's capital, especially over the last four years while at the Washington Post. Over these years, we at the Post and others in the press endured unrelenting attacks. We were called garbage, scum, fake news, the lowest form of humanity, enemies of the people, traitors to the country. We were subjected to endless acts of intimidation. They included assaults on our professional reputations, costly lawsuits, threats against our businesses. Journalists were harassed and physically menaced. Many required special security measures to protect them from personal harm.

We were targets for no reason other than that we did the work the First Amendment calls us to do. We exposed what a president wanted to conceal, including abuses of power. We pointed to a pattern of deceit, and we would never yield to a president's bullying insistence on servility and sycophancy.

We were able to withstand this unprecedented assault on a free and independent press because The Washington Post was a strong institution. It had a heritage of practicing journalism of courage and credibility. All of us in that newsroom adhered to common values. They motivated us to get the truth, and tell it. All of us worked together with a shared sense of higher purpose.

It is no exaggeration to say that over the years journalistic institutions have contributed mightily to sustaining American democracy. None of them was perfect. They made and make mistakes. Journalists suffer from being human, like professionals in any other field. And our institutions, like others, are flawed.

But whether it was during the Watergate scandal that held a president to account, or when the Pentagon Papers were published exposing years of lying about the Vietnam War, or today while holding law enforcement responsible for wrongful arrests and deaths, the institutions of journalism have kept citizens better informed. They pressed this democracy of ours to stay true to its founding ideals.

My purpose in saying all this is not to focus entirely on journalism, though I believe its contributions to our communities and our country routinely are taken for granted. My purpose here is to talk about the need for strong institutions of all types and the need for all of you to make them stronger at a time when the temptation has been to tear them down.

Major institutions in this country over the decades have suffered a crisis of trust. The military and small business still inspire confidence. The medical system gained trust during the pandemic. But almost all others, religious institutions, police, Congress, the presidency, banks, technology companies, the press, even educational institutions have seen trust erode among the public.

We can understand why.

Many institutions have failed the public, and those failings are fresh in our minds. Abuses by police, court systems that treat the powerful gently and the weak harshly, technology companies that accumulate revenue but evade responsibility, financial speculators who escape accountability when their gambles bring an economy to its knees, a press that acts as if it knows all the answers before it has gone seeking them, politics that is more lousy performance art than serious problem solving.

We have been left with weakened institutions. They need to be restored. They need your help. Only with your help can they become stronger and better. The past few years have highlighted the urgency of this task. We once had confidence that our country was different from others that had tried democracy and failed. Ours we believed had a sturdy foundation and strong, vibrant institutions – Congress, the courts, the press, houses of worship, the scientific establishment.

But we learned in recent years that our institutions were more vulnerable to pressure and manipulation than we ever imagined. Many turned submissive when a powerful leader demanded it. Others went quiet for fear of reprisal. The truth suffered. Verifiable facts were denied. Expertise, experience, education, and evidence were devalued or outright dismissed.

Misinformation and disinformation flourished. A huge portion of the public was deceived and radicalized. Our democracy was pushed to the brink.

We can either give up on institutions that betray our values, or we can seek to repair them. I urge you to take the latter course: Repair them.

In his brief but remarkable bestselling book, *On Tyranny*, Yale professor Timothy Snyder laid out 20 lessons from the 20th century for how to protect our nation's democratic heritage and keep us from slipping into tyranny. The second lesson was this: Defend institutions. It is institutions, he wrote, that help us to preserve decency. They need our help as well. Do not speak of our institutions unless you make them yours by acting on their behalf. Institutions do not protect themselves. They fall one after the other unless each is defended from the beginning.

So, Snyder urged, choose an institution that you care about: a court, a newspaper, a law, a labor union, and take its side. I chose a newspaper long ago, straight out of college.

Choose your own institution. Make it more responsible, responsive. Make it more just. Make it more equitable. Make it more inclusive. Make it more creative. Make it better. Build it up.

I make this recommendation knowing that it runs counter to the tendencies of our times. Social media gives each of us a voice and a platform. People cultivate their personal brand, seeking attention uniquely for themselves, often aiming to monetize it. Individual celebrity is celebrated and emulated and envied.

Stop and think, though, of what institutions have done for you. Start with your family. That's a social institution. The family highlights above all how much you rely on others and how much others depend on you. It demonstrates the importance of shared values and norms, a common ethos that is for how we should behave. And it illuminates how those qualities can radiate outward and yield stronger communities.

Next, think of this institution, Suffolk University. Where would you be without it? Where would society be without it, and without other educational institutions like it?

Our higher education system has been the envy of the world. It has given us some of the world's greatest thinkers, inventors, creators, leaders, doers of all types. It brought you together without outstanding faculty. It brought you together with classmates who were there to support you and enrich your understanding of a world beyond your own. It instilled in you, I hope, a devotion to lifelong learning.

Early last year Hubal Levin, an analyst of American political and civic life, published a book called *A Time To Build*. It was a call for recommitting ourselves to American institutions. He begins by discussing what we mean by the word institution. They are, he aptly notes, the durable forms of our common life. They are the frameworks and structures of what we do together. An institution, he says, both protects us and empowers us to interact with others. We aren't just loose individuals bumping into each other. We fill roles. We occupy places. We play parts defined by larger wholes. And that helps us understand our obligations and responsibilities, our privileges and benefits, our purposes and connections. It moves us to ask how we ought to think and behave with reference to a world beyond ourselves.

When I began these remarks, I mentioned that in my graduation 45 years ago, I was focused on myself. I was the center of the universe. That may be the case with many of you today as well. Or maybe you're better than I was when I was your age.

Life quickly taught me how I might contribute to the greater good, how I could serve a purpose beyond myself. For the many decades of my career, I found that purpose in journalism, in the cause of seeking the truth and delivering citizens information that should be in their possession, and ensuring that we have the democracy our founders intended, and strengthening news organizations that dedicate themselves to such work.

You, too, can find purpose beyond yourselves. I hope and trust you will. Do it in your church. Do it in a school, or in a business, or in a hospital, or in government, or for a charitable cause, maybe even in journalism. You will enrich the lives of others, and you will find your own life enriched as well.

Today is your day. We celebrate all you personally have achieved. But make it a day as well that you begin to think beyond yourselves. When you plan for how you will work with others to serve the common good.

Congratulations, again. The very best of luck to all of you. And thank you for the honor of being with you on this special occasion.