

Boston College Commencement Address

May 15, 2025

A Single Garment of Destiny

Louise Richardson

President Fr. Leahy, Your Eminence, distinguished guests, faculty, families and friends, and, most of all, new graduates. I am delighted to be here today.

It is a privilege to share this special moment in your lives. You have all worked so very hard to get here. I am thinking of all the hours you dedicated to studying for classes and exams, all the reading, all the lectures and seminars and labs and experiments. The part-time jobs you did and the sacrifices you made to stay on track and complete your degrees. But I am also thinking of your parents and others who have supported you through many long years of striving “ever to excel,” for knowledge and personal growth. I can feel their love for you and pride in you, like a glow of electrical energy that fills this space with warmth and light. You have done them proud. You do Boston proud. I offer you my heartiest congratulations.

The children’s broadcaster, Mr. Rogers, had a great question that he used to pose to those with whom he spoke: “Who are the people who loved you into being?” I invite you to look around you now and acknowledge those people. If they can’t be here today, hold them for a moment in your thoughts. This is a good moment to be grateful, to give thanks that we are here. To remember those who have gone before us. And to honor all those who made this moment possible.

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Today, you new graduates sit before us, handsome and beautiful, fresh-faced and hopeful, exactly as you should be. You look resplendent in your brightly colored maroon and gold robes, rather like superheroes with capes. At my old university, Oxford, where the doctoral robes are scarlet and blue, a gust of wind can easily turn the whole graduating class into Superman and Wonder Woman, with their capes flying out behind them. And, in a sense, this is not an idle comparison. In every graduating class, young people, carrying only a diploma and a strong moral compass, need to fly out of the gates of the college and save the world.

I mean it.

Only with your skills, your intelligence, your diligent and patient work, will the people of the future gain life-saving medical treatments, brilliantly designed buildings, new tools for living better and more fruitful lives, the chance of a just hearing in the law courts, and stories that tell the truth about our times.

I hope the degrees you have earned at BC will find you the employment you desire and deserve. But the education you’ve gained here is broader and more profound than that. I hope that you have found your people here. I hope that you have come to know yourself and express and question your thoughts and opinions in new ways. I hope that you will use what you have

learned not only to respond to the job market, but to shape change, embrace challenge, hear the call that asks you to go beyond everyday requirements and become the extraordinary individual only you, and one or two others, suspect you can be.

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We live in an exceptionally fragile moment.

Last year was the hottest year on record, confirming the trajectory of a decade of record-breaking temperatures on land and sea. Rapidly melting glaciers and sea ice are raising sea levels that threaten coastal cities like Boston. NOAA estimates that by 2050, Boston will be facing 50-70 high-tide flood days per year. At least a third of properties in this great city are vulnerable.

There are worrying signs that, in a world of shrinking natural resources, international cooperation, too, is receding like sea ice, with democratic rules and norms becoming thinner and more easily broken. Left unchecked, I fear that the current trend of recession — of rising sea levels and rising me-me levels — with the privileged scrambling onto ever higher ground to protect their assets, and the underprivileged forced to flee, fight, or go under — will lead to growing violence, hardship, and inequality that ultimately benefits nobody because it makes the global community less secure.

In the face of these major challenges, you young graduates of today need, above all, to be prepared to stand tall. To see clearly through swirling clouds of misinformation. To swerve the attacks of Doomsday and the other villains who make Superman's life so difficult. Your degrees have prepared you for this by arming you with facts, but also with friends, by helping you to develop habits of cooperative learning, testing ideas, and looking for solutions. You have the courage and the intelligence to regard debate as a strength, and accurate, research-based argument as a superpower. You are equipped to distinguish the truth and the light and to fight for what's right.

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The origins of the graduation robes you are wearing lie in medieval Europe. The first colleges were clerical institutions; the students wore a *cappa clausa* or sleeveless cloak, often on top of a cassock. The robe and hood became part of the Tudor uniform that distinguished Oxford and Cambridge scholars. The tradition emigrated from Britain to America. Even now, when scholars come to Boston College from diverse lands and cultures, it is a visible sign of unity. So you are wearing a long history of spiritual, as well as intellectual, tradition that links America with Europe and beyond. Here, under a cloudy Boston sky, we share a moment of collective belonging. Despite our differences, we affirm that what we share is more important. That unity in scholarship, in commitment to learning within an institution that upholds freedom and integrity and the equal worth of every student is, I believe, a powerful force for good.

There is a coincidence today. May 19th is the anniversary of the publication of Dr Martin Luther King's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" in 1963. King had been imprisoned for protesting shopkeepers in Alabama who persisted in posting offensive signs outside their stores instructing people of color not to enter. Racial segregation endured in America despite notional legal

equality. When rebuked for travelling from Atlanta to Birmingham to protest this situation, King wrote from his prison cell:

“I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states...Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly...Anyone who lives inside the United States can never be considered an outsider anywhere within its bounds.”

“Tied in a single garment of destiny.” Those words resonate very strongly with me as a scholar of international relations and president of a foundation. “Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.” I believe in the practical truth of what Dr King affirmed — the sense in which a failure to act on climate in China or India or Brazil affects America and vice versa. But of course, I also believe in the moral truth of his words. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. Today, the robes that you are wearing make especially visible the single garment of destiny in which we all are tied. They celebrate our connectedness. They also affirm the shared nature of our responsibility to one another, as global citizens.

It's important today to remember what unites us, when so many forces seem to conspire to pull us apart. I urge you, looking around today at your fellow scholars, to remember the strength of this diverse community. And to be willing, always, to reach across the divide. Be willing to use your reasoning skills to engage with both sides of a debate, to seek out those who oppose you, and encounter them fairly and civilly. Do not shut yourself off from the ills of other countries or of citizens who are not, in some respect, like yourself.

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The university is a vital, living emblem of what we can share. It cherishes the values we can hold in common in a diverse society. It is an engine of personal and societal growth and transformation.

I can testify to the power of universities to change lives, because they changed my own, completely. I grew up in rural Ireland in a family with seven children in a very different world than the one I occupy today. It was my education that enabled me to make the journey from there to where I am now: university in Trinity College Dublin; graduate school in America at Harvard; then a faculty position at Harvard before moving to Scotland as President or Vice-Chancellor of the University of St Andrews, then to England as VC of Oxford and finally back to America, as President of Carnegie. This education was funded, not by private income, but rather through scholarships I was awarded along the way. It created a bridge, as it has for countless others, that spanned nations and cultures, allowing me to travel to the place where I could become who I wanted to be. We need to keep these bridges open.

More recently, it was my privilege as president of Oxford to negotiate the development of the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine against COVID-19, which saved an estimated 6.3 million lives in its first year. The vaccine was produced at cost: not for private profit but for public good. It was academic partnership that made this fast, lifesaving collaboration possible. Similar advances are being made here by Boston College. In, for example, the [Global Observatory on Planetary Health](#), which conducts invaluable research on the dangers of plastic pollution to human and environmental health, but which is also leading research into how to make clean plastic out of

wood. These are just a couple of examples of how universities offer solutions to our shared problems that put public and social mission first.

Universities are an unqualified good. We must not allow them to be cowed or diminished. Or their vital work of research and education to be derailed for political ends. We need to defend our seats of learning as also the seedbeds of tolerance, powerhouses of invention, generators of wealth, and beacons of free expression. As freshly minted graduates, you are the new guardians of this galaxy.

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Superheroes are not born in quiet times. Famously, ‘Superman’ who made his comic book debut in 1938, just before World War 2, was invented by Jerry Siegel, who was born to poor Lithuanian-Jewish parents in Ohio, and Joe Shuster, whose parents were from the Netherlands and Ukraine.

Isn’t it interesting that Superman, that most American of heroes, from his cleft chin and six-pack to his outfit, recalling the colors of the American flag, was created by people whose families didn’t begin here? Like Boston itself with its proud history of immigration, Superman was born out of aspiration toward an ideal that didn’t yet exist, and that was built out of the collective dreams of millions of people who wanted something better for their children. He is an outsider figure from another planet who represents everyone and cares for all, enough to risk his life anonymously to save them.

There is a lesson there. What is best in America, what is most American, is and has always been its ability to turn seeming difference into seamless belonging, to embrace the persecuted and free the oppressed, to form a strong union out of disparate elements: *ex pluribus unum*. This is at heart a generous country, whose formidable strength lies in leadership that puts our hope for a safer world ahead of narrow personal interests, rivalries, or vendettas. This is the America that lobbied for the creation of the United Nations after World War II to ensure that no future generation would ever again face the horror of Belsen or Pearl Harbour, the starvation of the siege of Stalingrad, or the erasure of Hiroshima. That America led through sowing grain rather than sowing fear. It invested in public health that saw the end of smallpox and battled the international scourge of polio. It was an unrivalled superpower with a mission to promote world peace and global prosperity.

The superhero was invented as a strong antidote to feelings of powerlessness and inevitability. We need that more than ever today. To recognise and bolster the strength in our communities, the resilience in our institutions, and the resoluteness in ourselves. To confront those forces that oppress us, the grave problems that confound us, and the temptation to give way to a fearful inwardness rather than embrace our natural inclination to be outgoing: a good ally, a trusted custodian of shared values: justice, the rule of law, and democratic accountability.

Superheroes are not born in quiet times. You, as new graduates going out into a difficult world, unstable and divisive, and in need of fresh ideas, have a unique opportunity to reset the clock. With you lies the burden of difficult responsibility. With you, a marvelous universe of infinite possibility.

I wish for each one of you, today, a wonderfully rich and happy life. Not rich merely in a financial sense, though I don't downplay the financial hopes and anxieties that are part of every young person's vision of the future. But a future in which doing good is as important as doing well. In which serving the community in its widest dimensions — acknowledging our shared role as guardians of this abundant but fragile planet and all the lifeforms with whom we share it — is a daily joy.

I hope you will stay in touch with this College (your teachers really mean it when they say that they want to keep hearing from you) and with one another. Keep weaving that shared garment of destiny that binds us together.

I hope that, even if you never put on your academic robes again, you will keep feeling the benign power that they confer, and the amazing gifts that they confirm in you.

I celebrate your great achievement in arriving at this moment of becoming, where you embark on a new life, a different phase of existence. I hope that, whatever your dreams, this is *your* time to fly.

Thank you. Enjoy the rest of your day.