



Commencement 2012

Yale Law School Degree Candidates Urged to Remember the Poor, Work for Equal Justice

Photos by William K. Sacco, Yale University Media Services
and Tyson Streeter, Yale Law School

The venue was different but the ebullient spirit the same, at Yale Law School Commencement ceremonies on Monday, May 21.

Held this year in the rainproof Lanman Center at Payne Whitney Gymnasium, the program featured a powerful commencement address by Harvey Karp Visiting Lecturer in Law Stephen Bright, who was introduced by Dean Robert Post '77 as a “radiant example of humane courage and indefatigable spirit” who shows students “that the great dreams of reform, that so many students bring with them when they come to Yale Law School, are in fact real, living options.”

Bright, president of the Southern Center for Human Rights, said he would offer “some sad stories on this happy day,” not to deflate the high spirits but to raise awareness of the poor, the weak, and the vulnerable.

“I hope these stories will serve a purpose; that you will take them to heart; and that all of you—no matter what you do—will take an interest in the plight of those who often speak in voices too faint to be heard and that you will make a contribution to bringing us closer to realizing the promise—and constitutional guarantee—of equal justice.”

Bright, who himself has worked with the poor for more than 35 years, urged students to recognize that those who live in poverty are not a “faceless mass,” that each is an individual with a different life and a different story. He spoke of coming of age during the Martin Luther King, Jr. era and being inspired by Dr. King’s courage to fight for the rights of all people and end racial segregation.

“Have we lost our moral bearings?” he asked. “Have we abandoned concepts like, ‘the strong protect the weak for the benefit of all’ and ‘the duty of privilege is absolute integrity’?”





Margaret H. Marshall '76, former Chief Justice of the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court

What I learned here gave voice, gave structure, to the ideals I had yearned for in South Africa: a just society, a society founded on the rule of law. I was exhilarated as I sat where you sit today, eager to embark on a life in the law.



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Bright, whose talk was interrupted several times by applause, said his service to the poor and underrepresented has enriched his life. He challenged the students, whose lives up to this point have been understandably self-centered, to leave behind the “me”-ness reinforced by social media and to become other centered.

“Now it is time to pivot and ask, where are your extraordinary gifts needed? How do you make this legal world that you are entering a better world? One where no one is shut out; one where the weak and vulnerable are not exploited; one that produces fair results based on the merits of the issues before it.”

Other speakers included Dean Post, who offered special congratulations to the first class to enter Yale Law School under his Deanship. He said he hoped the Law School had given them the gifts of knowledge, vision, and confidence to prepare them for the challenges ahead:

“It is not enough that when you leave here you understand the challenges you will face, or even that in facing them you are able to envision new possibilities of improvement. You must also believe, deep in your souls, that you

matter, that your response to these challenges will make a difference to the world. You must have the confidence to respect your own considerable capacities, and this will inspire you to act, whenever action is needed.”

The students also heard from Margaret H. Marshall ’76, former Chief Justice of the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court who had received an honorary Doctor of Laws degree from Yale University earlier in the day.

Described by Dean Post as “one of this Law School’s finest graduates, and one of the most remarkable people I know,” Chief Justice Marshall spoke of being brought up under the oppressive apartheid regime

in South Africa. She said Yale Law School changed her life and inspired her to devote her professional life to searching for the elusive goal of justice.

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Two hundred fifty one degree candidates—222 JDS, 24 LLMS, 3 JSDS, and 2 MSLS—were honored at the ceremonies, which concluded with a special appearance by Monty the therapy dog.





Parting shots: Outgoing Associate Dean Sharon Brooks '00; Monty, the therapy dog, with owner/law librarian Julian Aiken



Dean Robert Post '77

*It is not enough to know the world as it is.
When you leave this place you must be
able to imagine the world as it might be.
You must be able to glimpse the possibilities
of change, of improvement, of that city on
a hill that we all yearn to inhabit.*