I want to use the time I have with you today to talk a little bit about storytelling.

Now storytelling may seem like a strange topic for a law school graduation speech - but please bear with me, because I think it is relevant.

And in the end, I hope you won't be disappointed. And if you are, you can always feel free to boo me -- because, after all, this is your day.

I want to talk about storytelling because storytelling is actually an essential part of being human.

In fact, great Israeli historian Yuval Noah Harari has taught us that it is the human race's ability to tell each other stories, to share collective inter-subjective fictions, to believe in collective myths and collective legends, that has made our very civilization possible.

The reason Homo Sapiens became the dominant species on this planet is not because they were smarter -- Neranderthals were just as smart.

Sapiens dominated Neanderthals because they developed storytelling first, which enabled mass cooperation and made society possible.

Because according to Harari, things like the state, laws, institutions, money, and corporations truly exist only in our collective imagination. They only work because we believe in stories about them.

They become reified because we believe they are real and we collectively trust in them.

Think about money. In reality, it is just pieces of paper with pictures of famous dead people on it -- until we believe the story that it has value. And only then can you save it, invest it, or use it to buy cool stuff.

Our society is effectively based on collective consensual hallucinations that are, in turn, based on the stories we tell ourselves.
And for the past three centuries, Western civilization has told a particularly compelling story.

It has told a story that individuals have rights and those rights are sacrosanct.

It has told a story that we are governed not by men and women -- but by laws and institutions.

It has told a story that the government must be held accountable to the governed and that the consent of the governed is the only thing that legitimizes government.

It has told a story that all citizens are equal before the law.

It has told a story that contracts are sacred and enforceable under the law.

It has told a story that freedoms of expression, conscience, and assembly are fundamental.

It has told a story that judiciaries and legislatures need to be independent of the executive.

And it has told a story that diverse, multi-ethnic, and multi-confessional societies can balance liberty and equality.

And it has told a story that the sovereignty of small nations is no less sacrosanct than that of great powers.

All of these things have become true and real only because we believe them -- we believe the story.

This is a story, a grand narrative, that has facilitated unprecedented peace and prosperity, and it is a story that has captured the imaginations of people across the globe.

And it is a story that is not based on race, or ethnicity, or religion. It is a universal story in which the collective "we" in this story is defined by one thing and one thing alone: We freely choose to live in societies governed by law.

We believe that story. That is what defines us. That is who we are.

Now you may have noticed that the word "law" has come up repeatedly in my description of our Western story.
And this is no accident. Because law is the heart and soul of our Western story.

Which brings us to you.

Because while today is a day for you to celebrate, tomorrow (or maybe the day after tomorrow depending on how much you celebrate), you will begin defending our Western story.

Because regardless of what kind of law you end up practicing;

Whether you practice corporate law, real estate law, human rights law, or intellectual property law;

Whether you litigate in courtrooms or offer legal advice in boardrooms;

Whether you prosecute accused criminals or defend them;

By practicing law and upholding the law you will be telling our common Western story and you will be on the front lines of its defense.

And this is more important now than it has been in a long time.

Because in recent years, many have stopped believing in our common story.

This century has witnessed the greatest crisis of confidence the West has experienced in a generation.

The September 11, 2001 attacks and their aftermath; the Iraq war and subsequent upheaval in the Middle East; to the 2008 financial crisis and the subsequent Euro crisis and migrant crisis; have all fed this angst and malaise.

The economic and cultural shocks of globalization have caused a critical mass of citizens in the West to become alienated and disenfranchised.

Many voices within our Western family are saying that our story is no longer as powerful as it once was; that our institutions are broken; and our democracies dysfunctional.

Many believe that Western liberal democracy is no longer working for them and they are seeking alternatives.
According to a study published in The Journal of Democracy, the share of young Americans who say it is absolutely essential to live in a democracy has dropped from 91 percent in the 1930s to 57 percent today.

And as the West goes through this crisis of confidence, there voices from the outside, particularly from a large Eurasian power to the East, that are telling a very different story.

This Eurasian power is telling the story that it constitutes a distinct and morally superior civilization, one that is upholding traditional values.

It is telling a story claiming that is surrounded by enemies who seek to undermine these values and only a strong, authoritarian, patrimonial leader can protect them.

It's telling a story that freedom leads to chaos, that human rights lead to moral deprivation, and that individuals need to be subsumed into the organic whole of the great monolithic state.

It is telling a story that it has been deceived, betrayed, humiliated, and unjustly denied its rightful place in the world.

It's telling a story that the world is more stable when it is run by empires and great powers that lord over spheres of influence. It is telling a story that the sovereignty of smaller states is limited at best.

Now I think we all know who is telling this story, and we don't need to name the man or the country.

But if you look at this story, it looks pretty familiar.

Because it is a story that has repeatedly throughout human history led to war, repression, and deprivation.

All stories, all narratives, all collective hallucinations, are not created equal.

Ask yourself honestly: which of the two stories that I described today would you rather have as the guiding principle of your society?

Which leads me to the whole point of my remarks.

We in the West need to learn to tell our own story again, because we have forgotten how to tell it.
We've forgotten its power. We've forgotten its inspiration. And we need, very much, to rediscover this.

And in these times of doubt, anxiety, and angst, we need to remember something else: liberal democracy isn't supposed to be perfect, it's not supposed to be paradise, it's not the end of history.

In fact, if you read the founding documents of the American Republic, what you learn is quite the opposite: liberal democracy is a pragmatic system that uses institutions and law to manage human imperfection.

It expects humans to be selfish, greedy, and something even evil.

As James Madison wrote in Federalist 51: "If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary."

Our Western story is supposed to be messy and sometimes even chaotic. But it's the best story we've got and we need to get better at telling it and defending it.

So celebrate today, you've certainly earned it. Because tomorrow, you join the ranks of the custodians of the law -- and in doing so, you become the guardians of our Western story and our Western civilization.

Thank you and good luck!