

How to Survive the Journey Ahead: A Graduation Message for a Terrifying Age

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"No matter who you are, no matter how strong you are, sooner or later, you'll face circumstances beyond your control." — Cersei Lannister, Game of Thrones

Those coming of age today will face some of the greatest obstacles ever encountered by young people.

They will find themselves overtaxed, burdened with excessive college debt, and [struggling to find worthwhile employment](#) in a debt-ridden economy on the brink of implosion. Their privacy will be [eviscerated](#) by the surveillance state. They will be the subjects of a [military empire constantly waging war against shadowy enemies](#) and government agents armed to the teeth ready and able to lock down the country at a moment's notice.

As such, they will find themselves forced to march in lockstep with a government that no longer exists to serve the people but which demands they be obedient slaves or suffer the consequences.

It's a dismal prospect, isn't it?

Unfortunately, we who should have known better failed to guard against such a future.

Worse, we neglected to maintain our freedoms or provide our young people with the tools necessary to survive, let alone succeed, in the impersonal jungle that is modern America.

We brought them into homes [fractured by divorce](#), distracted by [mindless entertainment](#), and [obsessed with the pursuit of materialism](#). We institutionalized them in daycares and afterschool programs, substituting time with teachers and childcare workers for parental involvement. We turned them into test-takers instead of thinkers and automatons instead of activists.

We allowed them to languish in [schools which not only look like prisons but function like prisons](#), as well—where conformity is the rule and freedom is the exception. We made them easy prey for our corporate overlords, while instilling in them the values of a celebrity-obsessed, technology-driven culture devoid of any true spirituality. And we taught them to believe that the pursuit of their own personal happiness trumped all other virtues, including any empathy whatsoever for their fellow human beings.

No, we haven't done this generation any favors.

Based on the current political climate, things could very well get much worse before they ever take a turn for the better. Here are a few pieces of advice that will hopefully help those

coming of age today survive the perils of the journey that awaits:

Be an individual. For all of its claims to champion the individual, American culture advocates a stark conformity which, as John F. Kennedy warned, is "[the jailer of freedom, and the enemy of growth](#)." Worry less about fitting in with the rest of the world and instead, as [Henry David Thoreau urged](#), become "a Columbus to whole new continents and worlds within you, opening new channels, not of trade, but of thought."

Learn your rights. We're losing our freedoms for one simple reason: most of us don't know anything about our freedoms. At a minimum, anyone who has graduated from high school, let alone college, should know the Bill of Rights backwards and forwards. However, the average young person, let alone citizen, has very little knowledge of their rights for the simple reason that the schools no longer teach them. So grab a copy of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, and study them at home. And when the time comes, stand up for your rights before it's too late.

Speak truth to power. Don't be naive about those in positions of authority. As James Madison, who wrote our Bill of Rights, observed, "All men having power ought to be distrusted." We must learn the lessons of history. People in power, more often than not, abuse that power. To maintain our freedoms, this will mean challenging government officials whenever they exceed the bounds of their office.

Resist all things that numb you. Don't measure your worth by what you own or earn. Likewise, don't become mindless consumers unaware of the world around you. Resist all things that numb you, put you to sleep or help you "cope" with so-called reality. Those who establish the rules and laws that govern society's actions desire compliant subjects. However, as George Orwell warned, "Until they become conscious, they will never rebel, and until after they rebelled, they cannot become conscious." It is these conscious individuals who change the world for the better.

Don't let technology turn you into zombies. Technology anesthetizes us to the all-too-real tragedies that surround us. Techno-gadgets are merely distractions from what's really going on in America and around the world. As a result, we've begun mimicking the inhuman technology that surrounds us and have lost our humanity. We've become sleepwalkers. If you're going to make a difference in the world, you're going to have to pull the earbuds out, turn off the cell phones and spend much less time viewing screens.

Help others. We all have a calling in life. And I believe it boils down to one thing: You are here on this planet to help other people. In fact, none of us can exist very long without help from others. If we're going to see any positive change for freedom, then we must change our view of what it means to be human and regain a sense of what it means to love and help one another. That will mean gaining the courage to stand up for the oppressed.

Give voice to moral outrage. As Martin Luther King Jr. said, "Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about the things that matter." There is no shortage of issues on which to take a stand. For instance, on any given night, [over half a million people in the U.S. are homeless](#), and half of them are elderly. There are [46 million Americans living at or below the poverty line](#), and [16 million children living in households without adequate access to food](#). Congress creates, on average, [more than 50 new criminal laws each year](#). With more than 2 million Americans in prison, and close to 7 million adults in correctional care, the United

States has the largest prison population in the world. At least [2.7 million children in the United States have at least one parent in prison](#). At least [400 to 500 innocent people are killed by police officers](#) every year. [Americans are now eight times more likely to die in a police confrontation](#) than they are to be killed by a terrorist. On an average day in America, [over 100 Americans have their homes raided by SWAT teams](#). It [costs the American taxpayer \\$52.6 billion every year to be spied on by the government intelligence agencies](#) tasked with surveillance, data collection, counterintelligence and covert activities. All the while, since 9/11, the U.S. has spent more than [\\$1.6 trillion to wage wars in Afghanistan and Iraq](#) and police the rest of the world. This is an egregious affront to anyone who believes in freedom.

Cultivate spirituality, reject materialism and put people first. When the things that matter most have been subordinated to materialism, we have lost our moral compass. We must change our values to reflect something more meaningful than technology, materialism and politics. Standing at the pulpit of the Riverside Church in New York City in April 1967, Martin Luther King Jr. urged his listeners:

[W]e as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values. We must rapidly begin the shift from a “thing-oriented” society to a “person-oriented” society. When machines and computers, profit motive and property rights are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered.

Pitch in and do your part to make the world a better place. Don’t rely on someone else to do the heavy lifting for you. Don’t wait around for someone else to fix what ails you, your community or nation. As Gandhi urged: “Be the change you wish to see in the world.”

Say no to war. Addressing the [graduates at Binghampton Central High School in 1968](#), at a time when the country was waging war “on different fields, on different levels, and with different weapons,” *Twilight Zone* creator Rod Serling declared:

Too many wars are fought almost as if by rote. Too many wars are fought out of sloganry, out of battle hymns, out of aged, musty appeals to patriotism that went out with knighthood and moats. Love your country because it is eminently worthy of your affection. Respect it because it deserves your respect. Be loyal to it because it cannot survive without your loyalty. But do not accept the shedding of blood as a natural function or a prescribed way of history—even if history points this up by its repetition. That men die for causes does not necessarily sanctify that cause. And that men are maimed and torn to pieces every fifteen and twenty years does not immortalize or deify the act of war... find another means that does not come with the killing of your fellow-man.

Finally, prepare yourselves for what lies ahead. The demons of our age—some of whom disguise themselves as politicians—delight in fomenting violence, sowing distrust and prejudice, and persuading the public to support tyranny disguised as patriotism. Overcoming the evils of our age will require more than intellect and activism. It will require decency, morality, goodness, truth and toughness. As Serling concluded in his remarks to the graduating class of 1968:

[“Toughness is the singular quality most required of you... we have left you a world far more botched than the one that was left to us... Part of your challenge is to seek out truth, to come up with a point of view not dictated to you by anyone, be he a congressman, even a minister... Are you tough enough to take the divisiveness of this land of ours, the fact that](#)

everything is polarized, black and white, this or that, absolutely right or absolutely wrong. This is one of the challenges. Be prepared to seek out the middle ground ... that wondrous and very difficult-to-find Valhalla where man can look to both sides and see the errant truths that exist on both sides. If you must swing left or you must swing right—respect the other side. Honor the motives that come from the other side. Argue, debate, rebut—but don't close those wondrous minds of yours to opposition. In their eyes, you're the opposition. And ultimately ... ultimately—you end divisiveness by compromise. And so long as men walk and breathe—there *must* be compromise...

Are you tough enough to face one of the uglier stains upon the fabric of our democracy—prejudice? It's the basic root of most evil. It's a part of the sickness of man. And it's a part of man's admission, his constant sick admission, that to exist he must find a scapegoat. To explain away his own deficiencies—he must try to find someone who he believes more deficient... Make your judgment of your fellow-man on what he says and what he believes and the way he acts. Be tough enough, please, to live with prejudice and give battle to it. It warps, it poisons, it distorts and it is self-destructive. It has fallout worse than a bomb ... and worst of all it cheapens and demeans anyone who permits himself the luxury of hating."

As I make clear in my book [Battlefield America: The War on the American People](#), the only way we'll ever achieve change in this country is for the American people to finally say "enough is enough" and fight for the things that truly matter.

It doesn't matter how old you are or what your political ideology is. If you have something to say, speak up. Get active, and if need be, pick up a picket sign and get in the streets. And when civil liberties are violated, don't remain silent about it.

Wake up, stand up, and make your activism count for something more than politics.

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