

# Tom Hanks delivers the Commencement Address | Harvard Commencement 2023

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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dkPo5nfEk1w>

- Now listen, it's not fair, but please don't be embittered by this fact. Now without having done a lick of work, without having spent any time in class, without once walking into that library in order to have anything to do with the graduating class of Harvard, it's faculty or it's a distinguished alumni, I make a good living playing someone who did.

(people laughing) It's the way of the world kids. On behalf of all of us who studied for two years at Chabot Community College in Hayward, California, two semesters at California State University, Sacramento, and for 45 years at the School of Hard Knocks earning a bachelor of arts degree in one damn thing after another, thank you.

I do not, thank you. I don't know much about Latin. I have no real passion for enzymes and public global policy is something I scan in the newspaper just before I do the wordle, and yet here I am closing. Closing for Josiah, Pallas, and Vic. Thank you guys.

(people clapping) Some of us here can recite by repetition the preamble to a television show we might have seen five days a week about a strange being from another planet with powers and abilities far beyond those of mortal men, Superman, who disguised as a mild mannered reporter for a great metropolitan newspaper, there were many metropolitan newspapers once, and some of them were great, who could change the course of mighty rivers and bend steel with his bare hands.

He was faster than a speeding bullet and he was more powerful than a locomotive and he was able to leap tall buildings at a single bound and those are very, very impressive superpowers. No, well, what was most impressive about his powers was how he chose to wield them. Yeah, yeah, yeah. Cats were saved from trees, evil doers were banished to the phantom zone and the innocent were rescued with reliable and assuring regularity.

But in those half hours, which have since grown to many full length films and multiverses and God, you kids see them all, was the ongoing struggle for not just the protection and safety of the world, but to the exposing of crooks and their lies to the light of day. Superman, you see, and his proxies of Wonder Woman and Captain America and Black Panther and the Black Widow and the Fantastic Four, my God, there's a million of them.

They are all enmeshed in that never ending battle for truth, justice and the American Way and in such a struggle being a Superman is a plus, even with his one lethal weakness exposure to chunks of the wreckage of his home

planet destroyed by its own hubris and apathy. But hey, there ain't no Superman nor anyone else in his Justice League. There's just us on this planet. Now, on occasions such as this, beware of certain orders who resort to using sage quotations from historical figures or the words of legends of literature and arts or the name dropping of famous friends, as a claim to some kind of wisdom or super ability.

Some people standing at this podium shouldn't be considered much more than lucky sots who are in the right place at the right time with the right goods and the right attitude or as a man named Marlon Brando once said to me, Vic, would you pick up that name I just dropped. Marlon Brando, would you hold onto it till we're done? Thank you. Give it back to me at the end. I'm gonna need it back. Yes, as a man named Marlon Brando once said to me on a message he left in my telephone answering machine, "Tommy, Tommy Hankerchief.

This is Marlon Branflakes calling you to ask where you are." Then later, he told me that when he was a young man and registered for the draft, he filled out the form for his name and age, but when it came to his race, he wrote human. "For Tommy, Tommy, what are we, all, but human? Yeah, we are all, but human Now as an armchair historian who reads non-fiction for pleasure, the books divine that there has never been a graduating class that has not faced the greatest challenges of all time.

That come every spring the maelstrom of history swirl so wildly that no matter the year or the era or the generation, there is always an atmospheric river of events that makes right now the hinge upon which our fate is turning. And we here in the stands look at you all in the caps and the gowns and we hope, "Oh, at last, help is on the way." Somewhere matriculating today is a man of iron, a woman of steel a superhuman just in the nick of time.

Now this is not because we have failed in our duties or are completely spent. We have done some very super things over our generations. It's because we are all in a cage match, mixed martial arts battle royale with agents of hubris, apathy, intolerance, and braying incompetence, the malevolent equals to imperial storm troopers, Lex Luthor and Loki, and we could all use a superhero right now.

(people clapping) Now looking out at the flowing colors of Harvard yard, the goofy big hands that clap, the balls that represent the world on which we live, the streamers in the piatas and someone's very big face rendered large out there amongst. There she is. That's it. That's it.

We see beings who are young and restless with energy and imagination, with righteousness and enlightenment and joy and compassion and we celebrate your proclaimed wisdom and your work ethic. We know no one is faster than a speeding bullet. To our shame, every day, to our shame. But we can still summon more power than a locomotive and we are able to leap tall buildings at a single bound, if we have the right gizmo.

We can change the course of mighty rivers if such a thing should be done and we make machines that bend steel as easily as using our bare hands and we know that to each other, we often seem like strange beings from another planet in habits and tastes and languages with holidays and foods we eat and names of the days of the week, all varying. We all have special powers and abilities far beyond the reach of other mortals.

Some of us can repair a screen door with ease. Some of us can take care of a five year old kid and a toddler for 24 hours a day and never stop loving them. Some of us make sense of physics and economics and global policy. Some of us survive somehow on minimum earnings.

Some of us graduate from colleges by years of lockdowns in Zooms. Now these achievements are all stellar, even though, yes, we are all but human. Still, we'd like to look up in the sky and see not a bird, not a plane, but well, someone who is young and strong and super who will fight the never ending battle for truth, for justice and for the American way.

Someone who will take on that work. (people clapping) Now, all right. Now, a kooky uncle once said to me, "We should all stay in school as long as we can because the moment we graduate, we have to work every day for the rest of our lives." Now that uncle was a bit bitter, but he was not wrong.

We all get to complain about the man and we all have debts we gotta pay and we're all entitled to a day off to lay about. But the work that is called for that we must do has no expiration date. It is the construction of our more perfect union and that job will never ever be completed. It's one that requires rigorous attention, unfading wherewithal and all hands.

The work is the keeping of the promises of our promised land, the practice of decency, the protection of freedom and the promotion of liberty for all with no exceptions. And man, that takes on a lot of work. (people clapping) It's work that is done on multiple job sites every single day and you can call each of them the battle for truth, justice and the American way. Yes, the American way. The American way is exemplified in both plain sight and in subtle attitudes, in moments of routine exchange and in broad expectations.

It's in places of historic weight and import and in the small spaces in which we all stand, the American way could be exemplified when you respect the law and the rights of all? Because if you don't, who will? When your food is brought to you, when you thank the server. Because if you don't, who will? When you pick up the litter that has missed the recycling bin? Because if you don't, who will? When you vote your conscience and make sure your neighbor has the opportunity to do the same with theirs.

Because if you don't, who will? (people clapping) When you make good on your victories and learn from your losses because both are the results of proud and noble efforts. If you don't, who will? The American way was first proposed not far from here when subjects of a king demanded more control over their lives than that dictated by someone else's definition of providence.

At the same time, women had no legal recourses. An entire segment of the population had been taken from their homeland and slaved to work as chattel regardless of their age and the original inhabitants of this continent from sea to shining sea, the only ones who carried the DNA of America, were considered subhuman. Yet even with such paradox was written down the how to establish justice, ensure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare and secure those blessings of liberty for ourselves and our posterity no matter, as time and conflict and the institutions of our democracy would determine, our gender,

our race our creed, our color, our chosen deities or who we love, for it is our manifest destiny to pursue our own happiness.

All of us, no exceptions, are entitled to the inalienable rights of liberty and freedom because we live in the United States of America. (people clapping) The vocabulary of the American way, of the law and the rights we share is some part philosophical, amusing, some part answering a question with a question some part trying to bull us all over with your knowledge of Latin.

Some part answering the question with a question and the rest is all practical. It's even physical and it's certainly tangible. It's the language of telling the truth. What is truth again in Latin? - Veritas. - Veritas. The language of telling the truth. It is in the vision quest for truth that we look to you newly incorporated members of the Justice League of Avengers to come to the rescue, for the truth to some is no longer empirical.

It's no longer based on data, nor common sense, nor even common decency. Telling the truth is no longer the benchmark for public service. It's no longer the salve to our fears or the guide to our actions. Truth is now considered malleable by opinion and by zero sum endgames, imagery is manufactured with audacity, with purpose to achieve the primal task of marring the truth with mock logic to achieve with fake expertise, with false sincerity, with phrases like I'm just saying, oh, well, I'm just asking.

I'm just wondering. Now, literally you cannot believe your eyes and your ears will help others lie to you. Someone will report the world to you exactly as you wish it were full of alternative facts, of conjured narrative meant to buttress the status quo and deny its offenses or rejug the rules and muddy the playing field, depending on where one is on the food chain and the moral spectrum. The American way can be demonstrated without ceasing as a perpetual prayer by every big shot in any plain Jane or Joe Blow.

Justice can be an everyday pursuit, case by case with both lightning speed and the slow inevitable effect of gravity. Truth though, oh, truth, truth feeds up in the high country, as elusive as serenity, yet as certain as the north star and the southern cross. Truth is mined at the intersections of our chosen behaviors and our fixed habits in our personal boundaries.

Truth has synonyms such as honesty, honor, transparency, and yet the common practice of so many is to play fast and loose with those very words to create enemies, to claim victimhood, to raise the mediocre into merit and to make cloudy a vista that is actually crystal clear. Likewise, truth has opposites. Omission. You don't need to know that.

Distraction. That's not the real story, this is. Opinion masquerading as clairvoyance, oh, here's what is gonna happen. And influence pedaling. A lot of people are saying. Truth too, has a nemesis equal to any colored kryptonite. That, lack of feral hound, is never too far off the path in the weeds and in the shadows, lying in wait for the lethal opportunity to bring truth down and that beast is indifference, which will make moot all the permanence found in truth.

Indifference will rust away the promise of our promised land. Propaganda and boldface lies will erode over time. Idolatry and imagery lose luster and effect, ignorance and intolerance can be replaced by experience in the wink of an eye but indifference will narrow the vision of America's people and make dim the light of Lady Liberty's symbolic torch.

Indifference make citizens into indentured servants held in labor by the despots and tyrants whose default setting is cynicism, who outlaw dissent and ban art and dialogue and books. Who grab power any way they can. Enabled by the subterfuge of their co-conspirators, rewarding their rationale of the complicit and surging into the vacuum caused by the indifference of a people who have been made weary by struggle, so weary that they lose hope and are left to yearn to be saved by the fiction of superheroes.

Every day, every year, and for every graduating class, there is a choice to be made. It's the same option for all grownups who have to decide to be one of three types of Americans, those who embrace liberty, and freedom for all, those who won't, or those who are indifferent. Only the first do the work of creating a more perfect union and nation indivisible.

The others get in the way. In the never ending battle, you have all officially joined as of today, the difference is in how truly you believe and in how vociferously you promote and how tightly you hold to the truth that is self-evident. That of course we are all created equally, yet differently. And of course we are all in this together.

If we do the work, justice and the American way are within our grasp, no matter our gender, our faith, our station our heritage or genetic makeup, the shade and hue of our flesh or the continental birthplace of our ancestors. Why is that truth so hard for some to accept, much less respect? If you live in the United States of America, the responsibility is yours, ours.

The effort is optional, but the truth, the truth is sacred, unalterable, chiseled into the stone of the foundation of our republic. All of us are able, none of us are super. We are the Americans. Liberty and justice is for us all because yes, we have specific names and we have lived every year of our ages, but when it comes to race, we are all uniquely magnificently, simply human, or so said Marlon Brando to Tommy Tommy Hankerchief.

May goodness and mercy follow you all the days, all the days of your lives. Godspeed. Congratulations. (people clapping)