

Address to the Class of 2007
146th Graduation Ceremony

By David M. Schizer

This class will always hold a unique place in my heart. Your first semester at Columbia Law School was my first semester as dean, and we have had three exciting years together. This occasion is bittersweet for me, as it is for you, because I am sorry to see this remarkable group disperse. But I know that your ties to the school and to each other will remain strong. If you want proof, look at the members of the Class of 1957, who marched here 50 years ago and have marched again today to celebrate their ties to each other, to Columbia, and to you.

Like generations before you, when you go out into the world, you take Columbia Law School's reputation with you. At first, you will be the one who benefits, as the school's reputation opens doors for you. But before long, you will no longer need the Columbia name. Instead, Columbia's reputation will begin to draw strength from you and your achievements, not the other way around. With your unparalleled ability, your energy, and the training and opportunities that our school has given you, your professional success is assured.

But another important question needs to be asked: Will you find happiness? I want to share some thoughts with you on this crucial subject. After all, you have so many paths open to you. How can you choose one that will make you happy?

Do What You Love To Do

I hope it is obvious that this should be your goal when you evaluate career options. Figure out what you love to do, and make it your life's work. Your professional life will consume most of your waking hours. Better to greet the day with anticipation, instead of with dread. If you love what you do, your enthusiasm will drive you to excel.

Of course, you probably don't know yet what you love to do. The next few years will be a journey of self-discovery. Do you like to organize a complicated effort, so that every

member of the team knows what to do and everything gets done? Do you like thinking of a creative idea and writing it up? Do you like to address a group, or do you prefer one-on-one conversations? There is no “one-size-fits-all” answer here. Just because something is right for your best friend doesn’t mean it is right for you.

It is important to distinguish between working hard — something you all will have to do — and worrying about work. Stress can be a terrible waste of energy. If you work a long day, enjoy the time when you aren’t working — and make sure the people close to you have your full attention. You shouldn’t be off in a haze fretting about work. When you get a call or email about a problem on the weekend, the right response is, “How will I deal with this?” and not, “Oh my God!” Your work should feel more like an action movie than a horror movie. Letting your insides churn doesn’t help your clients or colleagues, and it will only exhaust you.

The truth is, time and experience will allay your anxiety. Nothing is as daunting the fifth time as it is the first. You also come to realize that new issues are exciting — not scary — because they keep your mind nimble. There is a broader point here as well: Focus on the positive. Nothing is ever perfect, and if you dwell on what you wish you could change, you will miss the chance to savor what is good.

One key to a positive state of mind is exercise. Keeping active is also essential to your physical well-being. You get only one body, and it will not always feel as good as it does now. Ironically, young people often strain to become successful and wealthy and then, when they get older, they wish their wealth could help them feel young again. At this point in your life, your joints don’t ache when you stand up, and you can stay up late into the evening — as you probably did last night — while still feeling good the next day. I’m sorry to say that this is going to change. Make your health a priority so that, as you get older, you can keep doing the things you love to do.

Family and Friends

Since time is your most precious resource, be sure to spend it the right way. When you come back for your 50th reunion, you are unlikely to wish you had billed 15 percent

more hours in your earlier years. Your greatest impact will be on the people closest to you — your family, your friends, and your colleagues at work. Don't take these special people for granted. They don't last forever, and neither will you.

Indeed, think of how much you owe your family and friends. The love they feel for you, the sacrifices they make, and the pride they feel in your achievements have helped to carry you here today. If you look at their faces, you will see that today is one of the best days of their lives. Someday, I hope you will savor a moment like this for loved ones you have helped. There is no greater feeling. But it takes effort and commitment to earn this sort of satisfaction. You will feel frustrations in life — we all do — but you shouldn't take them out on the people closest to you. Even when you are tired — as you surely will be, much of the time — you need to save some of yourself for the people you love. Your spouse or partner is your most important ally, and you have to work to keep the relationship strong. If you have young children, you need to get down on the floor and play with them sometimes, even if your back hurts and a pile of work is waiting for you. Without these experiences, your family will not feel close enough to you, later on, to keep you in their lives. Nothing is sadder than the disintegration of family and friendships in this way, just as nothing is more beautiful than the flourishing of these ties.

Integrity

An essential part of honoring those you love is setting the right example in the way you live. Ethical short-cuts do not lead to happiness. After all, nothing ends a party like a call from the U.S. Attorney. Even if you are never caught, you have to live with the fact that you didn't really achieve what you claim to have achieved. Sometimes sticking to your principles is hard, and this is when your character is tested. In whatever you do, there will be dark moments when you want to take the easy way out, or to surrender to defeat that seems inevitable. Imagine how devastated, and how embittered, Franklin Roosevelt, Class of 1908, must have felt when he lost the use of his legs to polio. If he had decided to retire from public life, no one would have faulted him. But he obviously chose a different course, developing a tenacity — and an ability to project optimism in the face of adversity — that changed the world.

Sometimes doing the right thing is lonely. Paul Robeson, a prominent performer and activist from the Class of 1923, lived abroad for years because his vision of racial and economic equality was so tragically at odds with prevailing sentiment in the United States. Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Class of 1959, would have been a much less controversial figure in the 1970s if she had stuck to Swedish civil procedure — her first academic field of expertise — instead of championing women’s rights. A time may come when you will feel called upon to take a controversial position, and I hope you follow their courageous example.

Part of integrity is being prepared to reevaluate our views, and to admit when we are wrong. Ben Franklin famously made this point at the end of the Constitutional Convention. Stark differences had emerged among the delegates, and it seemed that everyone would soon leave without an agreement. So Franklin rose to support the new constitution, even though he didn’t agree with everything in it. “For having lived long,” Franklin said, “I have experienced many instances of being obliged by better information, or fuller consideration, to change opinions even on important subjects, which I once thought right, but found to be otherwise. It is therefore that the older I grow, the more apt I am to doubt my own judgment, and to pay more respect to the judgment of others.”

Public Responsibilities

Franklin and his generation understood something else that is too often forgotten in contemporary life: the debt we owe our community. An individual’s pursuit of happiness cannot succeed unless the community is also thriving. This is especially true in the legal profession. Lawyers play an invaluable role in a free society — helping individuals order their affairs — but we have little to contribute in a totalitarian society. Where citizens do not have the right to speak their minds or make their own choices, there is little for lawyers to do.

We live in a magical moment in world history in which, more than ever before, intelligence and hard work are the keys to success. In a meritocratic competition, you will all rise to the top — indeed, you already have. But how would you fare in a Hobbesian world that values brute strength and ruthlessness? Or in a theocratic order that rewards

the right kind of faith? Or in an aristocratic regime that values the right kind of birth? Had we been born in another time or place, our lives would be very different.

Liberty under law is a rare way of life — in my opinion, the finest way of life that humanity has ever imagined. We need to commit to protect this ideal, and to perfect it. But there is an irony here. When a society is devoted to the happiness of individuals, the focus on individuals can lead us to forget that, at the end of the day, we owe a profound debt to the community. As the old saying goes, “freedom is not free”. The threats to our world are familiar, and they are frightening.

This brings me to my final point. Next year, our Law School turns 150 years old. It is worth asking what our world will be like 150 years from now. Will our democratic ideals be as firmly entrenched? Will our people be as safe? Will the economic future seem as bright? My best guess is that life will be even better than it is today, but even the greatest optimist can imagine darker possibilities. To navigate this uncertain future, we will need leaders who are wise, courageous, and creative. You have been chosen and trained to play this role, and you are now ready to begin your work. We are all counting on you.

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