

**Remarks of Gillian Lester
Dean and Lucy G. Moses Professor of Law
Columbia Law School Graduation
Thursday, April 29, 2021**

Thank you, Chizoba.

On behalf of the entire faculty and administration here at Columbia Law School, it is my great pleasure to welcome you, graduates, parents and grandparents, siblings and spouses, friends and loved ones.

Today we come together to celebrate the graduation of the Class of 2021 and recognize their achievements. And, here also, we recognize the hard work, encouragement, and unwavering support given by all those who join us alongside these newly minted graduates. This is your day, too.

As you can probably see, I'm broadcasting this address from the Law School, in Drapkin Lounge. And as I look out through the windows and onto Columbia's campus, I see that the cherry trees have blossomed—a change of the season, a mark of transition. I also think about graduations of years gone by.

In those prior years, as I have sat down to compose my remarks to the graduating class, I've sometimes felt a little tug in my conscience, a tiny voice asking whether the rarified environment of the Law School, with its classroom hypotheticals and verdant campus walkways, had given adequate preparation to our graduates for the world beyond our walls, a much more chaotic and unpredictable place.

For this class, there's no such question in my mind. You have arguably seen more chaos, convulsion, and unpredictability over the last 14 months than past graduates have seen in their first decade of practice.

On the global scale, a pandemic that has killed more than 3 million people. A national reckoning with our country's painful, shameful legacy of racism that has seen tens of millions take to the streets. A fraught election capped by a violent insurrection at our Capitol. A staggering rise in catastrophic climate-related disasters—hurricanes, floods, wildfires.

And in our daily lives, we have seen a rapid pace of change in adapting to the pandemic: in the use of technology, in how we work and study, in how we relate to one another, to maintain

relationships and form new ones, in how we show empathy and responsibility for our fellow citizens, questioning societal structures, patterns, and habits, and our own places within them.

Yes, your time in law school has been one of the most dynamic periods in our history. You have been trained as lawyers in the twin registers of change and adaptation. What's more, in the years ahead, we are almost certain to see these changes reverberate in the law.

Right now, as we celebrate your graduation, our society is poised on the cusp of a period of explosive reimagination and contestation. Voting rights, civil rights, financial regulation, competition policy, tax policy, information governance, the social safety net, even our basic constitutional order—critical issues like these are shaped by institutions that are constructed by laws and stewarded, led, drafted by lawyers. At no moment in my life, at least, have we seen such an urgent call to retool our core civic, political, legal, and regulatory architecture.

Given all that you've seen as law students, as well as the moment you have arrived at today, you have already taken your seat at the table. And as leaders of a generation that will shepherd us through this transformation, that's exactly where our society needs you to be.

The experts, the doers, the ones who will be called upon to see this change through: They will be you.

Sounds kind of daunting, doesn't it? So, how will you take on this challenge?

In the face of change or uncertainty, there's a common emotion that many of us feel, and it's fear. And fear can lead to an urge to retrench and seek solace in the familiar. My advice to you is to resist this impulse. I'm not saying that you need to seek change for change's sake. I'm saying that you need to resist the opposite. Resist beating a retreat that's borne exclusively of fear, because uncertainty, if you let it, can also act as the wellspring of creativity and liberation from old habits that have outlived their purpose. It can help you to take stock of your priorities. What's important to you? What did you come to law school to do, and how will you see that through even if things look different than you'd expected? How have your priorities changed over time, and what does that mean for how you will contribute?

You will need to see your part, choose it, and own it. And in the coming years, each of you will be confronted with situations outside of your control. Novel challenges that have no blueprint, no past successes or failures to guide your approach.

And it's along these uncharted paths where you will be tested the most. When this happens, place your trust in the knowledge and judgment that you have acquired through your study of law and also what you have learned about yourself and each other in the process. I have every confidence that you will rise to the challenge of change like no other graduating class before you.

Why do I have this faith?

Because you are here today. Because you have had the guts and the stamina to earn your degrees in the most extraordinary of times. And while a memory of upheaval will surely mark this

period in the Law School's history, the most important thing that anyone will remember in this story is you: your achievements, your poise, your perseverance.

Finally, as we mark this moment, remember that this is a time of personal change as well. You are transitioning from law student to lawyer, trading the classroom for the world beyond. You are transitioning to another home, perhaps away from New York, or leaving the proximity of friendships or family.

It's important to be careful stewards of this change, too. Stay anchored to the friends you have made and to those that you love. Give generously to those who are important to you, and be open to asking for support when you need it. And, just as you have during this improbable law school experience, form community wherever you go.

The world you are entering after finishing law school is undeniably different from the one that existed when you began. And it is surely destined to change more in the coming years.

But my faith in you, the faith of your loved ones who have supported you during your journey, and the faith of our entire community remains unshakable.

Graduates, this is your time now. And you are prepared for the challenge.

You've got this.