

**Remarks of Gillian Lester
Dean and Lucy G. Moses Professor of Law
Columbia Law School Graduation
Wednesday, May 20, 2020**

Thank you, Elizabeth, for your kind introduction.

And let me extend my own welcome and congratulations to all of the parents, partners, children, and other loved ones who have given us this wonderful time with your graduates.

Columbia Law Graduates, you arrive at this day having walked a challenging road these past weeks. For many of you, the burdens have gone well beyond the inconvenience of mastering Zoom. Some have flown—literally—to the other side of the Earth, others have struggled with illness, and others have lost family or friends to the pandemic. When I took this job five years ago, I never imagined I would open a graduation address with condolences, but this time calls upon us in ways we never dreamed, and together with the joy this day brings, we can also share grief.

One of the great ironies about the human condition, though, is that with loss we can also come to realize gratitude. In these past months we have felt sharply the absence of so many things: sharing lunch with our friends in the Law School; visiting with family; small parts of our daily routines, like nods to familiar strangers on our commute, putting a dollar in the tip jar at Hamilton Deli, elevator small talk. And physical sensations of the outdoors: the feel of wind on your face or the smell of the first blooms of spring. Experiencing these things—and lamenting their absence—is a gift of sorts: the gift of perceiving with greater clarity who and what we are grateful for. Don't ignore this perception. Act upon it. For to know what you are grateful for—and to express it freely—is one of life's greatest sources of joy.

I have come to realize these elements of gratitude myself in recent days. And with them, I have also come to realize the importance of purpose. For the last few months, we have lived our lives in “pandemic time,” where the passage between days and nights, weekdays and weekends, feels less clearly marked, and progress forward harder to discern. Sometimes it feels like being in the Bill Murray movie *Groundhog Day*. But I will tell you something that has anchored me despite this odd new world: that I—that *we*—have a larger purpose. It's still there, and it still matters, especially now. You enter a world that is defined not just by bricks and mortar, and not just by digits and bandwidth, but by laws and by those who will shape and defend them. It falls to us in particular, as

legal professionals, to ensure the triumph of humanity over despotism, of justice over expediency, of knowledge over fear. So I say to you today: Seize the place you have earned in our proud vocation! Give life to the purpose and passion that brought you to Columbia Law School in the first place. That purpose can never be quarantined: Your moment has come.

And that sentiment brings me to my last theme: hope. Our 26th president, and one of Columbia Law School's greatest dropouts, Theodore Roosevelt, quoted a line in his autobiography that he felt summed up one's life's duty: "Do what you can, with what you've got, where you are." Surely none of you asked for our current circumstances. But I have never seen a more full-hearted display of character of the kind that Roosevelt so prized than by you, our graduates, over these past weeks. And what hope it gives me! You've shown all of us that you are ready for the world *whatever* may be thrown in your path. Coming into 2020, we had already seen your brilliance. But these recent months have shown us also your courage, your compassion, your wisdom, and your humility. You, graduates, are our future, and because of what we have seen in you, I am full of confidence that you will lead us forward—to ford whatever rocky shoals may lie ahead.

So, graduates, with gratitude, with a fierce sense of common purpose, and with hope, I wish you, Class of 2020, my congratulations!