

**Remarks of Edward R. Morrison  
Columbia Law Graduation  
Monday, May 14, 2018**

Thank you—Casidhe, Elizabeth, Owen, and Romane—for that kind introduction. Thank you, Class of 2018, for the Willis Reese prize.

I want to spend the next few minutes talking about three things: what this prize means to me, what I hope you got from my classes, and what I wish I had taught you.

**I**

So what does this prize mean to me? Let me answer that question with a story.

Beginning in 6<sup>th</sup> grade, my dad raised me as a single parent in Utah.

I was a troublemaker at school. Seriously. I went to a parochial school where the nuns gave separate grades for class conduct. I received a D in 6<sup>th</sup> grade, a C in 7<sup>th</sup>, and felt victorious when I started getting B's in 8<sup>th</sup>. Perhaps out of desperation, my dad often had me take a bus to his work at the end of the school day, just to do homework in his office. Keep in mind that my house was only a few blocks from school.

In 9<sup>th</sup> grade, something changed. I met Nancy Miller. She was my Latin teacher and became something like a mother figure. Her generous kindness, empathy, and unyielding demand that I achieve my potential woke something inside me. I wanted to take every course she taught. When I left for college, I wanted to be like her. I came dangerously close to becoming a Classics major.

As I neared college graduation, I learned that my university awarded an annual prize to a high school teacher who had deep impact on students. Almost reflexively, I wrote a long-winded essay about Nancy Miller. I think the essay began with the word “arete,” ancient Greek for goodness and excellence.

When Nancy won the prize, I was happy but didn't realize how deeply it touched her. It wasn't really the prize that mattered to her, but the gesture of a former student, who was telling her that she mattered -- that she changed me.

Nancy died three months later from an acute asthma attack. She was 45. The teaching award was mentioned in her obituary. At her funeral, her mother asked me for a copy of the essay I had written. It was clear that the award mattered. I know now, very personally, that it does --- a lot. Thank you, class of 2018.

Now, the parents out there are probably wondering – If this guy got C's and D's in conduct during grade school, what's he like in the classroom? I'll let my student

evaluations speak for themselves. Here's one from my very first course, taught in 2003: "[Morrison's] only real strength that I can think of is that he showed improvement in speaking clearly as the semester progressed." Here's another from the same course in 2003: "His sense of humor leaves much to be desired. ... Usually I found myself cringing, hoping he wouldn't embarrass himself further."

Well, fifteen years later, I am standing here. The Willis Reese prize is a testament to the idea that, even at my age, it's possible to improve. Thank you for helping me get here, Class of 2018.

## II

Let me turn now to what I hope you got from my classes.

When I teach Contracts, I end the semester with a story. It goes like this: In The Path of the Law, Oliver Wendell Holmes described the law as an ancient dragon. It's your job to take the dragon out of its cave and either tame it and make it work for you, or kill it and start over.

But taming or slaying that dragon takes something that I think you've learned during your time in law school: perseverance. Moving the law forward takes a long time. It may sometimes feel like you are working at a rock pile.

That may sound depressing, but I don't think so. Nothing important in life comes easy. What is depressing is to find yourself at a desk, toiling away, and wondering, "How did I get here?" Ask yourself at least once per year, what do you hope to get out of your career? To change an area of law? To become a creative dealmaker? To understand the needs of your clients so well that you become a leader yourself? Keep that goal ever-present in your mind. The law is too interesting of a place for you to wonder, "How did I get here?"

Let me give an example. I have a sister, Charlotte Morrison, who has spent 20 years now as a senior attorney representing death-row inmates at Alabama's Equal Justice Initiative. Charlotte is virtually a case study from Holmes' Path of the Law: She faces laws that are, quite literally, the gift of old England – laws that are worse than the ugliest ancient dragon, and laws that need changing.

What's someone like Charlotte to do? You realize that this is a marathon, not a sprint. You challenge the law, one inmate at a time. You fight rural poverty, you fight abuse in prisons. And, once in a while, you win. But that happens only once in a while. Once in a while, an inmate leaves death row. Once in a while, you change prison conditions. Once in a while, the Supreme Court takes your case challenging life imprisonment sentences for children.

The point here is that your daily grind can make a difference, but it may take a long time to see the difference.

### III

Before I go, I want to talk about something I don't teach, but wish I did: Be generous with your time. You are entering a profession where time is everything. Much of your professional lives will be measured by billable hours and deadlines. You may already feel that time is your most precious possession.

It is, but I want to encourage you to be generous with it in a particular way. Get to know the people around you, especially the people you don't "really" need to know.

Nearly a decade ago, I wrote a recommendation letter for a Columbia law student applying for a clerkship. He got the job. You know why? Not because of how smart he was or how hard he worked. A lot of people are smart and work hard. It was because of this: During a phone call, I told the judge that this student would be a good role model for my kids. He was generous as a listener, cared about your story, and shared his. For the judge, these things mattered as much as the student's intellectual gifts.

Why? Why did the judge care so much about these things? Maybe it's because we lawyers spend so much time advocating for our clients that we sometimes forget about the people around us. As much as we would like to think that our professional lives will be meaningful and have impact, the reality is that we may have our greatest impact on the people around us simply by being generous with our time.

### IV

Some of you are probably thinking, "That Morrison. He's being excessively generous with his time right now. When will this end?" Good news ... I am done.

I will miss you, Class of 2018. This will sound corny, and maybe it's just a reflection of my bald head and grey beard, but I worry about you the way I worry about my kids. I want to see you thrive. But I don't worry too much because you are terrific people, and you've spent three years here with my terrific colleagues. So maybe what I really want is for you to stay in touch with me. Check in now and then, OK?

Congratulations!