

**Remarks of Bert I. Huang**  
**Vice Dean for Intellectual Life and Michael I. Sovern Professor of Law**  
**Willis L.M. Reese Prize for Excellence in Teaching Winner**  
**Columbia Law School Graduation**  
**Wednesday, May 20, 2020**

Congratulations, Class of 2020! Graduates, families, all those who are watching this because they must really love you: I'm so honored to have this chance to speak with you today. You might think I'm here to accept your teaching award, but actually, I'm here to announce who's receiving it.

This year's prize for excellence in teaching goes to a group of remarkable people:

A first grade public school teacher in Houston, Texas, named Ms. Wynn, who once noticed a shy little boy in her class, and—by appointing him the keeper of her office keys—confirmed for him that he belonged. (This is the same Ms. Wynn who became Mrs. Nelson that year, breaking all of our little hearts.)

Middle school English teacher Dr. Marv Hoffman, who for three years edited in red ink every line we wrote. (Think about that: editing writing done by tweens.) His scribbles were illegible, but we learned from them anyway. What we learned was that he was looking at and looking out for each of us, each as our own person. Along with Dr. H., there's another English teacher, Ms. Serena Roberts. They had the generosity to let us into their minds as readers, letting us see how *they* marveled—so that we could also marvel—at the ways that words can play, can stun, can cry, can soothe.

The award is also shared by public high school teachers Ms. Eva Costa and Dr. John Beam, who would send us to the blackboard with these really hard physics and calculus problems, and then let us squirm as we tried everything, turning those equations inside out. But they knew—and we also knew—that soon enough, with or without their hints, our feeling of desperation would give way to that glorious feeling, that rush of imagination and insight, that would make us forget our fears.

And then there's our legendary biology teacher, Mrs. Ida Medlen, who did that thing on Scantron tests where you have like a dozen multiple choice options, because she used not only letters A through E, but also AB, AC, AD, AE, BC, and so on. Outside of class, Mrs. Medlen spent endless hours flipping through thousands of flashcards of practice questions that she made herself for our quiz bowl team, all on her own time.

She made knowledge feel like a virtue.

So did Professors Claudia Goldin and Larry Katz, models of a truly open intellectual curiosity, who would sit with their students in the lunchroom or take us on a walk (with their very talented golden

retriever) and listen with genuine interest to whatever we were thinking through, on whatever subject—allowing our ideas to become real for *them*.

And Professor Lani Guinier: For two years as her teaching assistant, I watched her evaporate that “fourth wall” in the theater of the classroom. In extra office hours (rehearsals, really), she would train her students to play the leading roles as each other’s teachers.

These remarkable people (and others I’ll have to tell you about some other time) share this prize today. But give me just one more minute to tell you about the two who mean the most to me.

It’s a story you may recognize.

They are immigrants from Taiwan who came to the U.S. for grad school when the law opened up our borders to them a half-century ago. They became professors too. But I know them as my very first teachers. Mom and Dad: I know you’ve won other teaching prizes, but you’re getting this one anyway. This one is for taking me page by page through that joyful picture book—that picture dictionary by Richard Scarry—and teaching me to read (successfully). It’s for getting me excited about the moon and the planets by taking me as a kindergartener to visit the scientists at NASA, when you also worked there. It’s for volunteering in my school libraries and always bringing me back the Caldecott and Newbery books. It’s for your patience, your sacrifices, your love. What child, what student, could be so lucky?!

Class of 2020, today you may also be feeling that your achievement is not yours alone, but is shared by many others. Maybe you’re thinking of your own teachers. (That was the idea!) Maybe your teachers here at the law school and teachers from throughout your life.

And maybe, like me, your appreciation for them has been growing, as we all come to see more and more how much the health of our democracy, the health of our population, the health of our spirit can depend on teachers like them, like mine in Texas and Massachusetts. Teachers who press with their whole beings against ignorance. Teachers who lead with their compassion, knowledge, conscience, decency.

Maybe you’re also thinking of others in your life, those who hold you upright in your most crushing moments, the way my dearest friends do for me. And maybe that moment is now, when *someone* is putting solid ground under your feet, as tremors shake our world—when someone has given *you* the grace to look after the people you care for, who are suffering or scared or most at risk as our essential workers and first responders.

Whoever it is you are quietly thanking, I hope you’ll find a way to tell them. Say to them, “We haven’t forgotten you, even if we’d forgotten to tell you.” If it’s someone you can no longer tell in person, like some of mine, say it aloud anyway. If it’s someone you’ve already thanked, say it again—why not?—especially if they’re sitting with you, watching this.

And when you do, when you thank them, I hope you’ll also ask: Who would they thank in turn for making them who they are to you? Think of it like you’re tracing a family tree, a “genealogy of thanks.”

I can start. Class of 2020, today I have *you* to thank, not just for choosing to recognize me, but because you were there with me in that classroom, as my students and teaching assistants, making it all happen. And so *you* are now branches in *my* genealogy of thanks. And so if you’re willing to tell

me who it is that you're thankful for—for making you the resilient, brilliant, conscientious people that you are—write to me. Write to me and tell me *your* stories.

I mean it. Hearing from you, whether tomorrow, or months or years from now, will feel like a continuation of this immense honor.

Thank you, and congratulations!