



**Remarks of Dean Gillian Lester
Columbia Law Graduation
Monday, May 20, 2019**

Congratulations to the Columbia Law School Class of 2019!

As you sit today at the very center of Columbia's campus, you are surrounded—quite literally—by concentric rings of friendship, love, community, and opportunity.

Your classmates, seated beside you, have become lifelong friends. They have struggled with you, lent help in times of need, and become some of your closest allies.

Beyond them sit your family and loved ones. They're here today to celebrate you, and they take enormous pride in your accomplishments. But they also deserve recognition—from you and from us—for delivering you to Columbia and for their devotion along the path that led you here. Let's give them a round of applause.

Beyond them lies a stunning campus of this great university—and not just a physical place, but a community of professors, staff, and students that's enriched you academically and personally.

And Columbia, as you will soon come to learn, is also a community of alumni. Today, we are joined by members of the Class of 1969, who are here to celebrate the 50th anniversary of their graduation from Columbia Law School.

Members of the Class of 1969, could you please rise so that we can welcome and celebrate you?

And finally, beyond the gates of Columbia lies a great city—a place of astounding opportunity. By now, every one of you is a New Yorker, endowed with limitless possibility.

So as we gather here today to celebrate your graduation and the start of a new phase of your lives, cherish the friendships you have built here, honor your loved ones, take pride in the Columbia University community of which you will always be a part, and draw inspiration from your time in this incomparable city.

Great friends. Great family. Great institution. Great city. That's a lot of greats. And in many ways, our world is consumed with the idea of greatness on an even broader scale.

We idolize business leaders who can turn start-ups into billion-dollar unicorns.

We venerate athletes whose prowess makes them the fastest, strongest, and best among contenders.

We love rankings—well, most of us do—of schools, law firms, and cities, even as we know that they can only tell us so much.

We obsess over the daily musings of so-called influencers who festoon our social media feeds with tips about beauty, style, and happiness.

The concept of greatness, it seems, is a shared value of our time—transcending identity, geography, religion, and politics.

Now, you may be wondering where I am heading with this. Surely, I am not about to throw shade on the pursuit of greatness and excellence, am I? That wouldn't be so great, would it?

But in fact, I am—just a little bit of shade. And here's why: If we slavishly fetishize greatness above all else, we walk into a trap: a trap of false binaries. We risk adopting a mindset whereby anything short of winning is, by definition, losing.

If we aren't successful, we fail; if we aren't the best, we're the worst; if we aren't praised, we're blameworthy.

And while we may sense, in our heart of hearts, know that this zero-sum outlook is a fallacy, we succumb to it all too readily.

So, what's the answer? That we all strive for mediocrity? Of course not. Instead, the challenge is to find excitement in the pursuit of mastery and excellence while at the same time rejecting this trap of false binaries. It's one of the most important things you can learn—the ability to hold these two things in your mind at the same time. A kind of equanimity.

Equanimity is a way of thinking that allows you to see more clearly that simple binaries can obscure truth. That life can be imperfect, and yet joyful. An even mind—one that achieves equanimity—remains unfazed in the face of imperfection, cool in the face of crisis, undiscouraged in the face of disappointment. And, conversely, it tempers you to receive your victories gracefully, with moderation instead of arrogance or swagger.

To be clear, equanimity is not apathy, nor is it indifference. To the contrary, it demands discipline and attention. But this quality, if you can cultivate it successfully, will make you a better lawyer and a better person.

Equanimity in the practice of law enables you to focus on doing the task at hand, rather than fretting over how you will be seen to have performed; it helps you to learn from others without the distraction of internal comparison. It allows you to pick yourself up and carry on when you suffer a setback, and it gives you a measure of humility and perspective when you gain advantage.

And so, too, equanimity can make you a better and more engaged citizen. It's no secret that we currently live in a time of deeply polarized public discourse—where it may be all too tempting to brand everything that is not deemed right as woefully wrong with the space in between crowded out completely.

The degree you have earned today is the culmination of years—a lifetime even—of hard work and dedication. When you walk across this stage, you might feel like you've finally achieved a measure of the “greatness” that has long motivated you.

And you have so much to be proud of—take time to celebrate it and all the good things that will follow.

But our world has a peculiar way of moving the goalposts. Sooner than you realize, you'll find yourselves in situations that require much of you. Today's feeling of accomplishment will cede ground to a different set of ideals and priorities—a new and seemingly more impossible set of criteria by which to measure greatness.

When those days arrive—and they will—strive to swim against the currents of a binary world; try to hold your thoughts in equipoise, finding the evenness of mind to suspend judgment, of yourself, as much as others; and resist the temptation to seize upon simple bromides borne of fear or discomfort.

That's what will set you apart. Not society's version of greatness, but your equanimity in moments of challenge, and in moments of triumph.

Class of 2019, the world awaits you. I salute you, and I congratulate you.

Thank you.