



**Remarks of Jonas Vernimmen '19 LL.M., LL.M. Class Speaker
Columbia Law Graduation
Monday, May 20, 2019**

What's up, Class of 2019!

I also want to welcome our guests, faculty members, parents, family, and friends.

My name is Jonas Vernimmen. I am a proud Belgian and, as you can see, European citizen. Go vote.

I am also those people's—right in the back, over there—I'm also those people's son, and before I start, I would like to apologize for not telling you this was going to happen. I also want to apologize for apologizing in public because I know how much you loathe being at the center of attention. Sorry, *mama en papa, ik hoop dat ik na vandaag nog welkom ben thuis*, and please don't run out of your seats.

Today, I have the honor of speaking to you all on behalf of the beautiful, talented, promising LL.M. Class of 2019, and the honor of speaking to my classmates.

Dear friends, you are truly an exceptional bunch. The faces of the people around you glow with great expectations. Great expectations for you as children, as partners and parents, as lawyers, as scholars, as leaders. They want you to realize your full potential: to be the best in your field. They want you to be successful, to be happy, maybe even wealthy or powerful.

Dear classmates, starting today, all eyes are on you.

Naturally, we will fail to live up to these expectations. It is true. We will. There are only so many cases that we can win, deals we can make, brilliant papers we can write, movements that we can build, only so many hours of sleep that we can skip. More than once we will let ourselves down, disappoint our friends, our parents, our loved ones.

And you know what? That is OK.

It is OK because true failure does not lie in not living up to expectations. Failure lies in not trying, in not disrupting or breaking, in not mending, in not improving, in not imagining. It lies in closing ourselves off from the challenges we face. It lies in being blind to the responsibility that comes with our privilege.

A Columbia Law School degree puts the world at our feet. It grants us access and credibility—credibility that others can only dream of. People look to and listen to Columbia Law graduates. People follow Columbia Law graduates. They will count on us to make the tough decisions, count on us to make the right decisions.

But we will have to be vigilant. Because too often the law has legitimized grave injustices. Too often academic, corporate, or political culture is used as an excuse for lawyers' actions. We can do better. We must. We are expected to.

All eyes are on you.

Fortunately, a single year at this school and among these J.D.s has given us new ideas, better arguments, sturdier skills, and a more precise moral compass to face future challenges. Most importantly, our time here has embedded us in this community so that we do not have to face that future alone.

Over the past months, we met like minds, minds that we liked, and minds that we minded. We found people who understand us; people who get who we are, where we come from, and what we care about; friends who recognize the madness of being a lawyer. We made allies who understand who we love, and why it shouldn't matter who we love; soulmates who brought comfort because they have also been unfortunate, have also been ill, have also lost a loved one.

This class. Our class. Their talent made us feel like frauds, shams, imposters. It was hard at times. But it was these same friends and colleagues who helped us overcome our fears, our insecurity.

They took our minds off with music, movies, and plays, showed us their culture and ways. They set us back on our feet, sometimes set us straight. They kept us up till way too late. Their honesty and kindness set them apart. More than once, we asked ourselves, "Do we really have to part?"

We do. But you will forever stay a part of this class, of this school. That bond does not end. Look around. From now on, wherever you go, someone in this crowd will be there waiting. Whenever you are in doubt, someone will be one call away. Whenever you fail—and you will fail—someone will help pick you up.

You will be in our minds. We will have your back. We will be looking over your shoulder. We will keep an eye out.

All eyes are on you.

Thank you and congratulations.