

Remarks of Maeve Glass '09
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Columbia Law School Graduation
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To the members of the Columbia Law School Class of 2021: Congratulations. Thank you for the immense honor of being able to be here and speak with you today. Teaching you, learning from you, has been one of the great privileges of my life. To the parents, grandparents, siblings, spouses, children, and all the loved ones who have cheered you on, lifted you up, and brought you back down to earth when you needed it most: Congratulations to you as well.

This has been a journey through law school unlike any before it. A journey for which none of you signed up, and yet, one that you have navigated with strength and determination, leadership, and grace. This, then, is a moment to celebrate, a moment to pause and reflect, to consider that which has come before us and that which yet lies ahead.

It is in that spirit of reflection that I want to begin today with a story. This is a story from a seemingly arcane case that has welcomed and confounded first-year law students for at least a century. It is a case that was there to greet you three years ago at the start and is here now at the end to help send you on your way.

Family members, you may have heard your graduate reference this case as “the one about the fox.” If you don’t know what I’m talking about, it’s OK. All you need to know is that it takes place on a beach not far from here, in Long Island, when one winter day in 1804, a man set out in pursuit of a fox and watched in dismay as someone else got to it first. Made famous two decades later by a law professor here at Columbia, this case lays out the rules of what one has to do to acquire ownership over something. For better or worse, it continues to serve as an entry point into our profession. In its brief few pages, one can tease out some basic lessons in lawyering: how to move between levels of generality, mold rules into standards, and tread in the space between what the law is and what it ought to be.

And yet, in the time that I have today, I want to suggest that this old case has one last, parting lesson to teach us. And the lesson is simply this: Every story we tell, every constellation of facts we assemble, has a frame. Change the frame, and you change the story. Change the stories that matter, and you might just change the world.

To see how this idea works and why it matters, let's start by returning to that old case and tracing the story it tells and the frame upon which it rests.

Published in one of the earliest case reporters in the country, this is a case that offers an inspirational story for the ages: a promise that in that newly created land of these United States, if you worked hard enough to come close enough to signal to the world your claim of what is yours, you, too, would find recognition in the courts of justice.

Now pause and consider the frame upon which this story rests. This is a frame of erasure. A frame that makes it impossible to see, much less to hear, the stories and the struggles of the peoples whose histories swept through and past that unrequited fox hunt by the ocean. This is a frame that took a place defined by thousands of years of possession, of life and beauty and complexity, and silenced it down to a single unit of space preserved in the words of the law only for its emptiness: a "wild and uninhabited" land, an "unpossessed, waste land." This is a frame that took a brutal age of conquest and enslavement, rooted in rules of dispossession based on the law's classification of the color of one's flesh and the source of one's blood, and reduced it all down to a single moment of original acquisition, erasing from view the whipping post the hunter's father kept in his kitchen, the names of the people he held in bondage, and the wooden cargo ships he dispatched from the frozen shores of New York to carry the fruit of the plantations to market: a vast web of stolen lands and stolen lives cast to the margins by this founding frame.

Hold onto that view for just a moment longer, and we can begin to glimpse how those who were the first to change this frame of erasure, those who were the first to speak with conviction and courage the truths that it silenced, began to change the arc of the world. Here, we need to pull back the frame once more to watch as those wooden cargo ships that were once the chosen symbol of the United States Constitution descended along a coast preserved today as a land of fragments—North versus South, nation version states—but that was in fact a land of pathways, ancient waterways of commerce that had connected the towns and ports and plantations together for centuries. Here, we need to listen not to the Supreme Court justice whose words etched in stone kept the cargo ships in motion—a man who once shocked his architect with a request to keep those whom he enslaved in a cellar, a man who still sits encased in bronze in the entry to the Supreme Court. No, here we need to listen to the words of the abolitionists, the refugees, the removed, the theorists, the lawyers, the poets, the artists who rose up and refused to sit down, who, at the risk of their own lives, kept a record of wrongs that could not be heard in the courts of law, those who shifted our gaze from the hounds preserved in pursuit of a fox to the hounds trained to hunt and terrorize those setting out on the backroads of America in pursuit of the promise of freedom and peace, those whose words and thoughts and struggles laid the foundations upon which we now stand today.

We are the beneficiaries of those who dared to question that opening frame, those who lifted up and made audible the truths that it could not, would not hold. As lawyers, leaders, teachers, we are duty-bound to continue the tradition they began. So today, as we send you on your way, I leave you with these parting words of advice. For those graced with the confidence in your thoughts and the command of your voice, cultivate the awesome power of listening. Speak less than you think you need to; echo those who have spoken before you; give credit where credit is due; and recognize

that that which you have assumed to be the final truth may be the beginning paragraph of a story that will take you to places that you cannot yet see and where you have not yet been. For those graced with pangs of self-doubt and sense of unbelonging, allow yourself to hear your words and watch where they soar and what heights they will reach. For all of us, question that which you assume to be settled, bring your whole self to bear, and do it with love and humility. There's work to be done, and no one else better to do it.

Class of 2021: Keep changing the frame, and that long line of fixed yesterdays will give way to the as-yet undetermined pathways of tomorrow. Keep changing the frame, and you will make this world a little more empathetic, a little more compassionate, a little more just.

Class of '21, congratulations, and go get 'em.