

**Remarks of Gillian Lester
Dean and Lucy G. Moses Professor of Law
Columbia Law School Graduation
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Well, good evening. It is my great honor on behalf of the faculty and administration of Columbia Law School to welcome you to the graduation ceremony for the Class of 2022. Welcome, to our student speakers, our graduation co-chairs, Professor Talley, and my colleagues seated behind me on the stage. Welcome, to the members of the Class of 1972, who celebrate their 50th anniversary of their graduation this year. Welcome to the parents, grandparents, and siblings, partners, and children, loved ones and friends. And welcome to our graduates, the Columbia Law School, J.D., LL.M., and J.S.D. Class of 2022. All of you, graduates, all of us are here today to honor you and congratulate you on all that you've accomplished. I hope you savor this day, take pride in your achievement, and feel the warmth of the embrace of all who surround you. To your left and right are your families and loved ones, your biggest fans, the people who have helped you in times of need and believed in you at every step. This is their day, too. Take a moment to acknowledge them.

In the weeks leading up to today, I've been thinking a lot about choices and decisions. Maybe it's because graduation is a time of crossroads, a juncture in life when many decisions are made. Or maybe it's because the pandemic denied us certain choices that we always took for granted. Or maybe it's just that every superhero movie now seems to involve the multiverse. Regardless, I think we can agree that one of the most important things lawyers do is help their clients choose a course of action, often in the face of complexity. No matter your practice area—whether you're employed by a nonprofit or by a government agency or a private firm—every single day you will be called upon to help your clients make good decisions. The good news is that you've just completed a course of education that will be very, very useful in this regard. You'll turn to the toolbox you've acquired at Columbia Law School. You'll gather data by interviewing clients and others, by collecting documents, and by reviewing the relevant law. You'll consider the pros and cons, the downside and upside, risks of different courses of action, the facts of each situation, how the law treats those facts, what things are uncertain, and the short- and long-term consequences of one choice versus another. You'll seek second opinions from colleagues to bring fresh eyes or greater depth of experience or critical distance to a problem. And you'll take the time you need to be thorough while also learning to trust when you've done enough and when you're ready to offer counsel. You'll get very good at providing sound, clear headed advice to clients. And soon enough, if it hasn't happened already, you'll find

that other people in your life—your family, your professional associates, people in your community—they’ll also look to you for guidance when they face tough decisions.

Here’s a surprise. While your legal training may help you become a superior adviser to others, you may be not so good at making decisions when it comes to yourself. That’s right. We can be really, really good at helping others make good decisions and at the same time be really, really crummy at making them for ourselves. How can this be so? Why do we so often make worse decisions for ourselves than we would for others? So let me give you three reasons, and these are based on research.

First, strong emotions wreak havoc. You know the feelings I’m talking about, where fear or insecurity can make us retreat from an opportunity. Where anger can make us rash or vindictive. Or where jealousy can make us judge too harshly a person who could and should be an ally. And a poor decision triggered by strong emotions can be amplified by another misstep: the tendency to justify our choice because our ego gets the better of us, or we don’t want to be seen as weak or hypocritical or not having what it takes to stick it out. So how do we not fall victim to this trap? Surely the solution can’t lie in avoiding emotion entirely and turning to our heads, our coldly analytic sides. Because sometimes emotions tell us where our heart is, where our values lie. The task, then, is to learn how to use both your heart and your head. When a decision feels freighted, ask yourself, “What? What is this sensation that I’m feeling? Why is my stomach in a knot? Why does it feel like my blood is boiling? Or my heart is full, beating with excitement when I think about this.” What emotion is driving this feeling, and what does it tell me about how I might behave? To be able to recognize the work that your emotions are doing and to know the difference between those that trigger poor decisions and those that actually help you find what you stand for is a precious skill. And when you really do get something wrong because your ego or biases or fears have led to astray, admit it. Honesty with yourself and humility are among the most potent tools you have to make better decisions.

A second reason that people make poor decisions for themselves is that we often make decisions based on who we think others expect us to be. Well, this is a problem in part because it can be entirely a fiction—you may be dead wrong about what other people expect of you, or you may be right about what they think, but it’s not right for you. Well, I’m not saying that you should ignore how your decisions will affect others. What I’m saying is that there’s a difference between making a decision based on who you think others want you to be and making a decision based on who you want to be. A mentor once gave me some good advice when I was faced with a hard decision. He himself was a leader who had to make many decisions every day under the glare of public scrutiny. And this is what he said to me. He said, “Don’t ask yourself, ‘What decision should I make?’ Ask yourself, ‘What decision would the person I wish to be make?’”

Third insight: People are wrong a surprising amount of the time about what will give them fulfillment. “Unless I ace this,” or “unless I make a lot of money,” or “unless I make partner in five years,” or “solve the problems of underserved communities entirely, I’ll be miserable.” This kind of absolutist, black-and-white thinking can lead to poor decisions like forgoing worthy paths, resisting change, or giving up important work because you think you’ve

failed or will fail. But you know what? There's a whole lot more messy trial and error in lives well lived than that weird, perfectionist homunculus in your brain is telling you. There may be times when you make mistakes. And there will be times when you achieve less than you had hoped. And there will be times when we lose after fighting the fight of a lifetime. And, it'll be alright. You can still find happiness and fulfillment and bring value to the world even when things turn out a whole lot different from how you thought they would.

So then let me come full circle. Law school has taught you a lot about how to gather and analyze facts and law, to weigh pros and cons, to assess risks, and to advise others with clarity and confidence. But my guess is that the beginning of your adult life has also taught you a fair amount about how you can sometimes be your own worst enemy when you're making decisions for yourselves. Combining the lessons of the classroom with learning to listen to your emotions—to heed the values you wish to live by, to embrace humility, and to give it your all while rolling with the trials and errors that will come your way—will not only help you make decisions in your own life, it will also make you a better lawyer and a better human being. Columbia Law School Class of 2022, we salute you. We celebrate you. And we wish you the best of all things that you set out on this next leg of your journey. Thank you.