

Stanford Law School
Law Class of 2004 Graduation Ceremony
Student Remarks

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Good afternoon.

I thought I would just get right to the point and talk about exactly what it is we are all thinking at this moment, which is: what have we gotten ourselves into? Part of the appeal of law school is that it's a respectable place to spend three years in order to put off that decision about what to do with your life. But suddenly, here we are, one degree heavier and \$150,000 lighter, and still not sure what to do.

That question, "what are we doing here," came up often over the past three years for me and I'm sure most of you. Being the lawyers in training that we are, this "why are we here" conversation usually resulted in a very logical, organized exchange between reasonable men and women who concluded that given all the costs and all the benefits, it made sense for us to continue on in law school even if we didn't ultimately want to be lawyers. And everyone here will be happy to know that because we've managed to convince each other that law school is a rational place to be, here we are today, graduating.

But you know, every now and then, I would talk to somebody who was not satisfied with the standard cost benefit analysis. Now these people, I'm not gonna lie, they're trouble makers. Because they force us to really look at the reasons we came to law school in the first place and what we want to do with our degrees.

I pretty much figured that once I got into law school, that decision was already made—obviously, I was going to be a lawyer. But I didn't realize that being a lawyer can mean anything from administering trusts to organizing civil rights marches to spending your days in a windowless office doing document review. So, wanting to be a lawyer doesn't really answer the question, and that brings us back to this conversation about "what are we doing here?"

Now, I've met people who know exactly what they want to do because they've wanted to do it since they were 3. These people are unhelpful. I've met people who know exactly what they don't want to do, and while I admire them for getting through 3 years of law school and then deciding not to take the bar exam, they're not so helpful either. But there are a few people who give great advice, because they can step back from the frenzy of outlines and exams and visualize what they really want to *accomplish* as lawyers. One of these people passed along a quote to me that I think is relevant to answering the question of what are we doing here. The quote is from Oliver Wendall Holmes who said:

“Through our great good fortune, in our youth, our hearts were touched with fire.”

If there’s one thing our class has learned in law school it’s that repetition is the soul of pedagogy, so let me repeat. “Through our great good fortune, in our youth, our hearts were touched with fire.”

Through our great good fortune, our great good fortune to be at a law school where the faculty members regularly argue cutting edge supreme court cases and still have time to chat with us in office hours. Our great good fortune to have the opportunity to work at the most prestigious and famed legal organizations around the country. Our great good fortune to be among classmates who are thoughtful, funny, caring, and intimidatingly smart, not to mention a group of you who are really good at salsa dancing.

Through our great good fortune, in our youth, our hearts were touched with fire. Why are we here? It’s because every one of us is passionate about something, so much so that it made us want to learn the trade of law so we could take action. Maybe it’s international human rights, the principles of federalism, the death penalty, or the criminal justice system. Some of us have spent the past 3 years searching our souls for that reason and some of us still don’t know. But there is an answer, you have to find it. Our hearts were touched with fire.

I think our class is different from other classes, and it’s not just because we got 98% participation on the class gift effort. We have been able to build a real community here, a network of close friends that I’m certain will remain strong long after we leave. One of the reasons is obvious—we just happen to be a group of extremely fun individuals—the admissions committee should definitely take note.

But I think another reason our class is so unique is that, for those of us who are JD candidates, we were in our second week of law school when the attacks on the World Trade Center occurred. Among other things, this brought about an instant camaraderie. I have this image in my head of everyone watching the news together that day in the law cafe, dumbstruck. I remember how our professors struggled to help us make sense of what had occurred. And I remember how we had to turn to each other for reassurance that law school was the right place to be.

The events of 9/11 also forced us to search for the answer to the question “what are we doing here” much earlier than most law students. In light of this tragedy, we came to understand the importance of the rule of law. We began to recognize the precarious legal and political balance that must be struck in times of crisis. We learned to respect the gigantic role that lawyers have in constructing reality. And today, even if you don’t feel ready, you are going to get a piece of paper with your name on it that says you are now qualified to help shape that reality.

So as for this question of what are we doing here, or maybe now, more appropriately, what’s next, the answer is different for everyone. But I think the point is that while we

were law school, we were given the chance to catch a glimpse of the possibilities. And we were given the tools to turn those possibilities into reality.

To my classmates, let me be the first to say congratulations and good luck. No matter what it is you choose to do, I hope that in the years to come you will always remember your great good fortune of being at SLS, and I hope that each one of you finds what touches your heart with fire. Thank you.