

STANFORD LAW SCHOOL

**Law Class of 2006 Graduation Ceremony**

Address

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I want to thank Kari the graduating class for this honor. Few things in our job could mean as much as this.

For your generosity today, and in so many ways, large and small, over the past three years, I would like to give something in return. Clearly, what the occasion demands is some advice built to last. Here, I have found myself in some difficulty. As I get older, I find myself in more and more in situations in which I am called on to dispense advice, and less and less certain what to say. It's not, I think, that I've learned nothing at all over the years. But I am acutely aware of how little use I have been able to make of much of it myself, and so feel somewhat abashed offering advice to others. One of your parents wrote, "Never trust anyone who says, This time will be different," and of course he is right about all of us. I am also less sure what it all adds up to, and less certain how much of it travels well.

So I did what any experienced teacher would do if she finds herself at a loss for what to say. I tossed the ball to all of you. I e-mailed the class of 2006 a bunch of intrusive and impertinent questions, and sent off a slightly different, but no less intrusive and impertinent questions, to those parents and loved ones whose e-mail addresses I could cobble together on short notice. I'm not sure what I thought I would get back, and what I thought I would do with it. I guess I hoped that something in what you all said would help me figure out what to say to you.

Be careful what you ask for in this life. So many of you responded, so generously, honestly, and movingly, that as I read through your responses I found myself at a different sort of loss—how to do justice to everything that has found its way into my e-mail inbox over the last week. I spent a lot of time this week trying to work your words

into some artful narrative in my own voice. But your words kept precipitating out of solution. In the end, I decided the only thing to do was to let them speak for themselves, and then try to return the favor. Here, then, for starters, is a small part of your answers to my ridiculous, intrusive questions. I wish I had time to read them all, because they all repay hearing. But I hope that all of you— those I was able to reach, and those I was not-  
-will find something of your own thoughts here.

I start with what is on the mind of the altogether classy class of 2006:

Question 1: What was the biggest surprise to you about law school?

That you and your colleagues let me in.

That it made me want to be a lawyer. - 3 -

How much I liked it.

How much I hated it.

Wow, Crothers Hall is a dump!

Finally, after years of being told that school would kick my butt, it finally did.

How fast 3 years would pass.

How happy I could be working this hard.

That none of the professors I've ever had tried to embarrass the students like law professors do in the movies. They're great.

This, from a significant other: My wife has changed. Fortunately, for the better. Unfortunately, I never win any arguments any more.

But far and away, the most frequent answer I got from all of you to this question was how much you liked and admired your fellow classmates. Your affection for each other shown through most of the responses I got. One of you wrote: "You hear the

stereotypes about lawyers being snakes and sharks, and I imagine that many of them do fit that role. But the students I have met at Stanford are some of the most wonderful people I have ever met.” Another wrote, “The incredible talents and accomplishments of my classmates. I am honored to be one of their peers and friends.”

Question 2: complete the sentence: Law school is \_\_\_\_\_

Like a pie-eating contest in which the prize is more pie.

Taxing, rewarding, too short.

Two years too long.

Secretly enjoyable (Your secret is safe with us)

Bearable only because it is Stanford

A cult

Expensive

Expensive, but worth it.

The hardest thing I’ve ever done.

Not as hard as I tell my parents.

Not as bad as people say

Not for everyone

Paradise

And this, from two different significant others: “Law school is.....Finally over, thank the lord”

Question 3: Your most indelible memory from law school?

Getting in.

My friends. In my humble opinion, my friends and I are hysterically funny.

Someone should base a show on us.

Vacuuming up the sawdust in Taper after working into the night on Musical props there.

Birdwatching with Professors Babcock and Grey—we saw two egrets mating.

Who could ever forget that?

Running off and getting married in Reno after class and then going to Corporations the next morning.

So many great ones. Cooking Sunday dinners and watching the Sopranos with my friends, a U2 show in Anaheim, making par on the 16th hole at the Stanford Golf Course, getting the right answer to a Celotex question in civ pro, Kentucky Derby BBQs, SPILF dinners at Prof. Greely's house.

The feeling of finishing 1L finals and being greeted by cheering 2Ls standing in the January (!) sunshine.

Riding in a dead-silent school bus at 3:30 AM toward the start of the Big Sur Marathon, while watching the lights of cars snake along route 1 and waves hit the rocks below and wondering how my first year of law school had led me to this. It was a great moment.

Dave Lieberman stealing Justice Kennedy's whiteboard eraser marker.

Visiting the Chad juvenile facility with Joan Petersilia's class on juvenile justice.

The visit had a greater impact on my future work than almost any other class in law

school. It's one thing to study about the effect of prison on children, it's another thing altogether to walk through a room of 15-18 year old sex offenders and realize that they are just kids, that they look scared, and that something happened in their lives to get them there.

Getting to see a case I worked on argued at the Supreme Court (and waiting in line at 5 AM in order to get into the courtroom to see that argument)

Eating a peanut butter and jelly sandwich with a spoon while studying for 1L finals because (1) I felt I didn't have time to wash a knife; and (2) my brain was too fried to realize I didn't need a utensil.

Sitting in Crocker Garden, eating our lunch in the sunshine, and feeling like the luckiest kids in the world.

#### 4. Best piece of advice anyone has ever given you?

Don't chase two rabbits or you'll end up catching neither of them.

My dad gives me two pieces of advice every night when I talk to him and my mom. The first is "Hunker down" The second is, "No Pitzer boys". I went to Pomona, Pitzer is the college next door where a lot of hippie types went to school. The last piece of advice he gives me every night is "You are loved." I have really great parents.

My uncle once told me not to date someone just because he looks good in a suit.

"Hugs are good" (This, from my dad who died during my first year of law school.)

If you save it to the last minute, it only takes a minute. Just kidding. Sort of.

Keep your drugs in the tent. Not in the car. –Barbara Babcock, during Criminal Procedure.

If you are going through hell, keep going (Winston Churchill).

10 percent of the US population lives in Ca. Everyone should try it once. That's what got me here.

The harder you work, the luckier you get.

Things always look better in the morning. My grandfather Chaput always used to say that.

Wear sunscreen.

If you need help, get help.

Remember who you are and where you came from (a high school teacher).

Don't be afraid to do the thing that makes you happy.

Now, some answers from your parents and loved ones:

Question 4. What surprised you most about your son/daughter/significant other?

That my son has spent the last 3 years in California and is coming back to the east coast with no tattoos or piercings.

As a young child, my daughter was very shy. I am amazed at how poised and eloquent she has become.

My daughter's academic success in spite of personal disorganization.

My son is sooooo smart.

I am surprised by how willing, no, how eager, he is to sing in Irish pubs!

The thing that has surprised me the most about my son is that as a child he was so conservative. He always wanted to dress the same way, wear his hair the same and eat the same foods. Look at him now! He seems to thrive on change. I love the way he tries to win me over to his way of looking at an issue. I don't think he'll rest until he turns me into a liberal as well.

I have always been amazed by my son's ability to make hard work look easy.

I'm not surprised but rather inspired by my daughter's perseverance. She's got chutzpah to spare.

That he still values our advice.

One of the biggest surprises came a few years back when my son did an Elvis impersonation at a friend's wedding. We had no idea he could sing, sing well, and sing sober (so he said). He was great. Wish he'd do it more often.

That she's more comfortable in her own skin at 24 than I would have thought possible.

Question 5. When you think of son/daughter/significant other, what makes you smile?

"This is a hard question," wrote one of your significant others. "There are so many. He's got this great laugh—very free and sweet—and I am in love with it. I can't help but smile when I think of it."

Another significant other wrote: "I sort of wish I'd gone to law school *with* my husband, so I could have had a big crush on him in class."

From your parents:

Her decency makes me smile. So also does her unbending will.

We are blown away by our daughter's intelligence, her quick wit, and her gorgeous smile.

My son's tenderness and care for people he knows will make absolutely no difference to the betterment of his own life.

My daughter's ebullience, her total lack of affectation, and her thorough enjoyment of "South Park" (ugh).

The thought of how great my son really is makes me smile, and that he calls often.

My son doesn't complain, he doesn't cry. He takes the hand he's dealt and plays his cards—and plays them well. He has been my proudest supporter and my good friend.

I love my son's writing. He can bring a smile or tears with the stroke of a pen.

My daughter has a beautiful smile, and her eyes twinkle when she smiles.

And this, from a father: What makes me smile? That my children have already eclipsed me. That each of my children teaches me, not the other way around. That sometimes they make me wonder who their father is.

Question 6. What do you most hope for, for your son/daughter/significant other's future?

There were a lot of common notes sounded here—so many, in fact, that I would have suspected cheating, if your loved ones didn't so obviously lack both the motive and the means. They don't seem to care much whether you get rich, although a few did express the hope that you would at least be able to pay off your law school loans. They hope for you, above all, a life of integrity and joy, work you care about, and people you love.

One parent wrote: “I wish my daughter laugh-out-loud joy in life. All her life, she will be bombarded with the miseries, hatred and agony in the world. So I hope she is able to revel in the moments of joy that make life such a great adventure.”

Said another: “I hope that my daughter has a passion for whatever she chooses to do, and that she will engage in life and the events of her time without fearing failure.”

“Every parent wishes that their children have health and happiness. On a larger scale, I do hope that this generation finally sees that we are all connected.”

“I hope that my son will understand that your life is defined by how you treat others.”

“I hope my son is happy in whatever he chooses to do in life. Whatever his choice, I hope he will do it well, be honest, and make a difference.”

“What do I hope for my son? That all HIS dreams come true.”

Now, a question to both graduates and family members:

Question 7: Do you have any lines of poetry stuck in your head? If so, would you be willing to write them down?

I’m happy to report that yes, indeed, many of you do have lines of poetry stuck in your head, and that you were kind enough to write them down. You sent me the closing lines from Matthew Arnold’s *On Dover Beach*; Wordsworth’s *Ode on Intimations of Immortality*; Dylan Thomas and William Blake, Billy Collins and Emily Dickinson,

Eliot's Four Quartets, Yertle the Turtle, Ecclesiastes, Coleridge, Langston Hughes, and many, many others as well.

One of you sent in this line from Romeo and Juliet: "I wish but for the thing I have." Another sent these beautiful lines from a poem by Mary Oliver: "You do not have to be good,/ you do not have to walk on your knees for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting./You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves."

In honor of the occasion, one student sent in this, from the ever sentimental Philip Larkin, "Get stewed: Books are a load of crap." Another student passed on these lyrics from Rilo Kiley (the indie rock band): "It's a sin when success complains."

Two parents sent along their children's favorite poems. One wrote: "For years my daughter would sign her name, and after her signature a line from Gloria Anzadua, a Latina author: "I'm like a tortoise, I carry my home with me" Another parent wrote, "My son's favorite poem is from Shel Silverstein: "If you are a dreamer, come in./If you are a dreamer, a wisher, a liar,/A hop-er a pray-er, a magic mean buyer.../If you're a pretender, come sit by my fire,/ For we have some flax golden tales to spin./ Come in!/Come in!" A third parent sent in his son's favorite quote: "The family seems to have two predominant functions: to provide warmth and love in time of need, and to drive each other insane." Not poetry exactly, but pithy like poetry.

Many of the responses, not surprisingly, were in an elegiac mood. One student sent in Robert Frost's "Nothing Gold Can Stay." Another sent in a hauntingly beautiful poem about loss called Azaleas, translated from the Korean, which he reports that every Korean schoolchild knows by heart:

Azaleas (Kim So-Wol; trans. by David McCann)

When you leave,  
weary of me,  
without a word I shall gently let you go.

From Mount Yak  
in Yongbyon,  
I shall gather armfuls of azaleas  
and scatter them on your way.

Step by step  
on the flowers placed before you  
tread lightly, softly as you go.

When you leave,  
weary of me,  
though I die, I'll not let one tear fall.

Still another sent in this beautiful, wry poem by Stevie Smith:

In my dreams I am always saying goodbye and riding away,  
Whither and why I know not nor do I care.  
And the parting is sweet and the parting over is sweeter,  
And sweetest of all is the night and the rushing air.

In my dreams they are always waving their hands and saying goodbye,  
And they give me the stirrup cup and I smile as I drink,  
I am glad the journey is set, I am glad I am going,  
I am glad, I am glad, that my friends don't know what I think.

OK. You have all so generously answered my questions; it's my turn to answer some myself. I will start with the ones you posed, in response to my last question to the graduates: "If you could have just one question about life answered, what would it be?"

It turns out you had a number of questions you'd like answered, and I will do my best to answer them. But time is short, so I'll have to work quickly. If anything's unclear, just see me after class.

“Do I need to worry?” You, no.

“Is there a god and am I him?” As to the second question, no. As to the first: I don’t think so. But opinions differ on this matter. If we don’t figure out a way to stop killing each other over that difference of opinion, we will all find out soon enough. Or not.

“Where is the line between having good habits and being neurotic, or being in love and being a doormat, or being true to one’s self and being rigid?” I don’t know, but having known you for 3 years, I am quite certain you’re on the right side of it—at least as to the first and third; as to the second, I don’t have enough information.

From many of you: “Can you be both a supermom and a superlawyer?” No. But you can be a decent mother and very fine lawyer. To do that, it’s probably a good idea to find a super life partner and a super boss, both of whom think that your problem is their problem too; find a super job you like enough to want to keep going in, even when the going gets tough; and take yourself seriously in life. It’s tough sometimes, but it’s worth it.

“Why does life seem so unfair at times?” Because it is.

“Why mosquitoes?” I’ve long wondered about that myself. I looked up the answer the other night. One pundit said: “The purpose of mosquitoes is to ensure the survival of their species by procreation.” I’m sure that is a pleasure and a privilege if you are a mosquito, but not a very satisfying answer if you are not. We all know what the question meant— it meant, is there any purpose to mosquitoes from the non-mosquito point of view? The answer, according to a parasitologist from Tulane, is no. From the non-mosquito point of view, mosquitoes have absolutely no redeeming social value.

Frogs and bats like to eat them, but it turns out they'd be just as happy eating any number of other readily available bugs that don't like to eat us.

“Why do we only really appreciate things after they are gone?” Because we're slow learners; because memory and desire cut deeper than the flesh.

And finally, this question, from many, in different ways: “What will become of me?” Ahhh- always a trick question at the end. I don't know. In lieu of an answer to *that* question, let me try to answer some of the other questions I put to all of you, in the hope that you will find something in those answers that will be useful along the way, in answering that question for yourselves.

1. What is the best advice you ever got? I guess the piece that has proved most durable is one I stumbled on when I was 17, in my high school year book, of all places. It was a quote that appeared under the name of a quiet classmate of mine, who mostly kept her own counsel. As soon as I saw the quote, I knew she was keeping wiser counsel than me. There it was, two lines on the page, staring back at me, radiant, radioactive: “If you see a flower, water it; if you see a weed, pull it up.” Those are tough words to make your peace with. But any other advice I've received since then has been pretty much superfluous.

If you decide to take that piece of advice on board, I think you may also need another piece of advice that's come my way, and that I have failed as miserably to live up to: Justice is a fine and true thing, but mercy is better. We all need mercy in this life—on ourselves, on each other.

2. When I think of all of you, what makes me smile? Your reverence, your irreverence, that I can listen in on an entire conversation among you and not understand a

single pop cultural reference, that you are soooo smart, that you have your whole life before you, and none of us has clue what fine and wonderful thing you will make of it.

Let us know what happens; we'll be cheering from the sidelines.

3. What do I most hope for for your future? Well, there are no surprises here. Like your parents and other loved ones, I hope for all of you a life of joy and bearable sorrows, a life filled with people who love and respect you and would walk through fire to save you, and the luck not to need it. I hope you are fortunate enough to grow old with the people you love. I hope you will start things the way you want to finish them, and do work you would be proud to sign your name to. I hope you can find a way to leave your children a better world than we are leaving you, and I am very, very sorry about that. Most of all, I hope you will fall hard for the life you find yourself in, and if you don't, that you will have the courage and wisdom to get out of it, and find one that you will.

4. Do I have any lines of poetry in my head? I have lots. But I will leave you with this.

#### Sometimes (by Shenagh Pugh)

Sometimes things don't go, after all,  
From bad to worse. Some years, muscadel  
Faces down frost; green thrives; the crops don't fail,  
Sometimes a man aims high, and all goes well.

A people sometimes will step back from war;  
Elect an honest man; decide they care  
Enough, that they can't leave some stranger poor.  
Some men become what they are born for.

Sometimes our best efforts do not go  
Amiss; sometimes we do as we meant to.  
The sun will sometimes melt a field of sorrow  
That seemed hard frozen: may it happen for you.