

Commencement Remarks
Dean Heather K. Gerken
2018 Commencement Exercises
May 21, 2018

Students, friends and families, colleagues, distinguished guests—it is my great delight to welcome you all to the Commencement Exercises for the 2018 graduating class of the Yale Law School.

We join together today to celebrate a crowning moment for 208 JD candidates, 23 LLM candidates, 3 JSD candidates, and 2 Masters of Studies in Law candidates.

Not long ago, you all converged on this place as strangers, bound together by little more than a remarkable set of talents and a desire to learn. You have challenged one another, worked together, mourned together, made each other laugh, and supported one another throughout your time here. With each study session in the dining hall, or with each late night writing briefs in the LSO basement or papers in the library, with each beautiful day spent lounging in the courtyard, and every frenzied lunch hour spent scouring for food, your experiences have transformed you from strangers to friends, and friends to family. In the

process, this school became more than just a building. It became your home. It's something I hope you never forget – that this place will always be a home for you.

We know, of course, that you would never become part of this community were it not for the communities that helped launch you in the first place. I want to take this moment to thank the families and friends who helped bring this remarkable group of graduates here. To the parents and grandparents, brothers and sisters, aunts, uncles, cousins, spouses, and friends in this gymnasium, we know that our students' journeys involved an enormous amount of hard work, patience, sacrifice, and love on your part. You have imbued these students with unshakeable values. You have nurtured their fierce intelligence and radiant personalities. And you have put up with some of the most argumentative people on the planet. We are so grateful to you for lending us these brilliant human beings.

In addition to the friends and family members here today, I know that there are also many people watching this Commencement from afar because they were unable to make it here today. Please join me in acknowledging those who are present and those who are not, and let's be sure we are loud enough to be heard all around the world. I ask everyone in this room to join me in acknowledging all you have done to make this day possible.

As members of the audience might guess, it is a challenge to teach students of this caliber. Happily, the same rule holds for teaching as it does for tennis: age and treachery beat out youth and enthusiasm. In all seriousness, though, the one group worthy of teaching such remarkable students is sitting behind me. They are some of the finest scholars, teachers, and lawyers in the country. They are dizzyingly talented, unfailingly creative, dedicated to a life of the mind and the finest values of the profession. Their ideas have shaped fields. Their lawyering has changed lives. They are all in enormous demand, and yet they have devoted countless hours to teaching you, talking through your ideas, reading your papers, and supervising your casework. These faculty members have given you grades and critiques, advice and encouragement, and way too many extensions. And they are here today for the simplest of reasons. They have rooted for you from the first day you walked into their classrooms, and from here on out they will glory in your successes. Please join me in thanking them for all they've done.

The faculty are joined by a staff that has made all things possible. They've kept you fed and caffeinated; procured Bunsen burners to make you s'mores; responded to frantic requests for A/V support; saved laptops; kept you on track to graduate; introduced you to goat yoga, and maintained a library that was warm, welcoming, and bat-free. Many of them worked incredibly hard to bring today's celebration, including Jan Conroy's dedicated publicity team, the fantastic folks

from the dining hall, the remarkable crew that works with our Dean of Students, Ellen Cosgrove, the diligent staff of the Registrar, Judith Calvert, and of course our own dynamic duo, Kevin Rose and Dean Mike. Please join me in thanking them for everything that made today possible.

Graduation is always the most sentimental of days, but as the first class that I'm seeing off, you are all especially close to my heart. I want to thank each of you for all you've done to sustain this community. You've dazzled us in the annual Field Fund concerts with musical performances that belonged in Carnegie Hall, not our dining hall. You've reduced the entire law school to fits of laughter during Law Revue. Don't worry, I won't talk about that here. What happens in Law Revue stays at Law Revue. And you've even recently been crowned the undefeated champions in intramural grad school softball. As one of you astutely noted, finally, YLS is number 1 in something that matters!

You've done more than sustain this community, though. You've shaped it, changed it, made it better. Strangely enough, change is one of the settled traditions of Yale. This place has always been imbued with a restless spirit. We've always been guided by the assumption that being the finest law school in the world is never enough. We are united by a deep belief that our students can do anything. And, as per tradition, you haven't just changed this community; you've helped change the world around us.

Change comes slowly, of course. At times it may feel as if you have fought many battles, but won no wars. But the law is, as John McPhee once wrote of a tugboat's load, "surely enough to make our slow motion massive, momentous, tectonic."

So let me just remind you of the legacy you will leave behind when you walk through those doors today. You've left behind not one, not two, but perhaps even three nationwide injunctions. You've left behind not one, not two, but three of the most diverse classes in Yale's history. You've written articles and papers that are already beginning to shape the future of scholarship and policy. You've awed us inside the classroom, delighting us by forcing us to rethink a position or change our minds.

It's easy to remember the headlines, but it's just as crucial to mention the other great legacy of your class. You have done the quiet, everyday work of true friends and great lawyers—providing help to individuals in need. In the long run, those are the motions that will ultimately become "massive, momentous, tectonic." That quiet, everyday work sustains us as a community, sustains us as a profession, sustains us as human beings. One of your most important but often unsung legacies is the countless hours you have spent mentoring the classes behind you, bringing them along and helping them blossom.

When I think of the quiet work of lawyering that so many of you have done, my mind immediately turns to the story of Vernon Horn. For many years, the law failed Vernon. He was locked in prison for 17 years and facing 53 more without parole for a crime he did not commit.¹ And then, after an enormous amount of leg work and digging, a group of Yale Law students helped uncover evidence that proved his innocence and freed him last month. One of the first things that Vernon said upon his release was that his freedom meant he'd get to attend the law school graduation ceremony of his advocates, Ali Gifford, Amit Jain, and Chris Desir. Mr. Horn, would you please stand so we can welcome you here today.

Mr. Horn's story is a story about the power of the law, a power that each one of you now possesses. And for all the celebration and hoopla today, I hope you will find that power humbling. One of the greatest challenges for lawyers and scholars is to reconcile the grand abstractions of our profession with the everyday work of being human.

Just think for a moment about what you saw this morning at graduation when the law school's maces were laid aside the others. This school did not choose for its symbol some giant, 25-pound gilded scepter, fit for a king. We chose a wooden walking sticks. Our maces are fit for a school – and a profession – like ours. They are meant to slip into the hands of someone who works rather than

¹ Email from David Keenan

someone who rules. They are meant for a school that trains you to serve as the voice of others rather than pronouncing from on high. Our maces are simple—modest, even—which means they are the right symbol for a school that has spent years training you to be humble about your own beliefs, to understand the weaknesses in your own views and the best in the views of others, to be righteous but never self-righteous.

Our walking sticks are also built for journeys, which makes them especially appropriate for today. In a few minutes, you will walk this stage in front of the people who witnessed the early days of your personal journey, and those who witnessed the early days of your professional journey. And I know I speak for every member of the faculty and staff when I say what an honor it has been to be with you as you step away from this law school and into a profession whose traditions are just as grand. As one of Yale's deans famously said to his young faculty, our flag flies with you. Go out and do us proud.