

Prof. Steven Gunn's 2003 Commencement Speech

Visiting Associate Clinical Professor of Law and Supervising Attorney Steven J. Gunn delivered the Commencement Speech to graduating JD, LLM, MSL, and JSD students, their families, and guests, in the William K. Lanman, Jr. Center, on May 26, 2003.

Good afternoon, Deputy Dean Rubinfeld, Honored Guests, Colleagues, Students, Family and Friends: This is your day, Class of 2003, and you have earned it! We have come together as a community, despite the troubling events of last week, to celebrate your achievements and to rejoice in the hope and promise for the future that your graduation represents.

Before continuing, I'd like to share a story in recognition of the rain. My wife, Heidi, and I got married nearly six years ago in the backyard of her childhood home. Heidi's father gave a toast. He said he was hoping for rain. He has spent much of his professional life doing mathematics research in Romania, and he told us there is a proverb in Romania that if it rains on your wedding day, you will have many children. It didn't rain on our wedding day. But, it's raining today. On this, the day we celebrate your symbolic marriage to the law, let us embrace the Romanian proverb of fertility. May you be the mothers and fathers of great advances in the law. Celebrate the rain as a sign of the justice you will birth. And, for your parents' sakes, have lots of children, too!

You came to Yale Law School three years ago -- or, in the case of our M.S.L., L.L.M., and J.S.D. graduates, one or more years ago -- with humility, awe, and perhaps even a sense of intimidation at the task that lay ahead of you. During your time here, you made this place your own, leaving your mark on it in so many ways. Your awe and sense of intimidation have given way to well-deserved pride and confidence in your abilities as young lawyers, scholars, and leaders. But, on this day, I ask you, as you prepare to leave this place, not to lose sight of the humility with which you entered it.

In that spirit, please join me in thanking some of the people without whom this day would not be so special. First, your families. Your mothers, fathers, grandparents, aunts, uncles, sisters, brothers, partners, and -- for some -- children, are, and always will be, your greatest teachers. They taught you about life, love, respect, and integrity long before your first classes here in September 2000. By the time we showed you the Rules of Professional Conduct, your families had already taught you about morality and helped you define your own code of ethics. They have loved you and nurtured you in ways that far exceed the standard of care of the "reasonable person" you met in Torts class. They held your hands when you needed support, but were brave enough to let them go when you needed freedom. They encouraged you to challenge yourselves, and they cheered the loudest when you succeeded, but they also reminded you that the strength of your character was far more important than any of your awards or accomplishments. All the while, your families have watched you grow into extraordinary people. And, now, they have traveled from across the country and around the globe to celebrate your graduation from the Yale Law School. For that, and for so much more, we are all grateful.

I'd like to say a special word now to your parents: As the new father of a two-and-a-half-month-old baby boy, I can tell you that I beam with pride when my son smiles at his mother and me, and when he makes delightful sounds with his emerging voice, so I can only imagine the tremendous pride you must now feel as your children cross this stage and receive their diplomas today. Congratulations to you, the extraordinary parents of extraordinary children!

Next, graduates, please join me in thanking your teachers. Seated behind me are many of the best and brightest scholars in the legal academy. In their company, I have been privileged to work for the past two-and-a-half years. Many of them were my own teachers when I was a student here a decade ago. They showed you the law -- the Articles and Amendments, opinions and statutes, regulations, covenants and draft declarations -- and they taught you the theories behind the law. They challenged you to think critically, to imagine a more perfect system of justice, and to advocate for that system, whether with your pens or with your voices, or through the voices of your clients. They have been your mentors and your role models and, in turn, you have been their heroes, producing extraordinary research and scholarship, contributing to our collective discourse

about the law, and championing the rights of your clients. Each of you will remember always one or more of your professors who touched your life deeply. You will remember them, as have I, in the defining moments of your professional life, and they will be there for you, inspiring you and teaching you from afar.

Finally, join me in thanking our associate deans, registrar, librarian, and staff. Please give special recognition to our staff: those who work in the library, computer services, and building services; our administrators and administrative assistants; our mailroom attendants, dining hall staff, and custodians. All of them keep the school vibrant and functioning every single day. They, too, are a central part of our family and they, too, deserve our recognition and respect.

And now, we turn our attention to you, our graduating students. Yours is a special class, the first ever to matriculate and graduate in the 21st century. You have done wonderful things in your time here, and you will be missed. You studied the law with an unmatched intensity of purpose, and you thrived. You published law review articles and notes. You presented papers at a student-faculty workshop that you initiated. You published award-winning books of fiction and non-fiction. You excelled at this year's national Moot Court finals, bringing home the nation's top prize. You organized speaker series and conferences. You played hard: running a 200-mile relay marathon in New Hampshire to raise money for New Haven charities; singing in Habeas Chorus (and in opera solos and concerts at used book stores); and dazzling us with your comedy in three spectacular Law Revue shows. You taught law to high school students in the New Haven public schools, and you organized weekly seminars for inmates at Greenhaven Prison in New York.

You marched in the rain with the members of Locals 34 and 35 when they went on strike, and you marched to the steps of the Supreme Court in defense of affirmative action. You represented clients in Yale's in-house clinics and in a capital defense externship of your own creation, advancing the civil rights and, in some cases, international human rights of your clients. You protested the Solomon Amendment. You raised money for public interest initiatives, and you also raised our collective consciousness about the need for greater diversity at the law school. Your gender report and the town hall meetings on race have already prompted constructive change in the classroom and within the administration, and that change will continue. You are truly exceptional people. This is a special graduation for me. I have been teaching at the law school since your first year. This year, your last, will also be my last at the school. Your graduating class, my first ever as a law professor, will always occupy a special place in my heart. I have seen you progress from timid, although extremely capable, first year law students to independent, confident young professionals, and I am honored to have been a part of that transformation. In turn, you have seen me grow into my new role as a law professor. In a very real sense, I am graduating with you today, and I could not imagine a better class to go out with.

As some of you know, I've spent my time here, and indeed the much of my professional life, trying to use the law to advance the rights of the poor. When I applied to Yale Law School, I was young and idealistic. I wrote in my personal essay that I wanted to do "everything [I] possibly [could] to make a positive difference in the lives of individuals who suffer." I still do, and I know that most, if not all, of you do, too.

But, the birth of my son, Asher -- and adulthood -- have given me a deeper perspective on life. I still want to better the world, but I also want to take pleasure in it. Of this tension, American author E.B. White once said: "I arise in the morning torn between a desire to improve the world and a desire to enjoy it. This makes it hard to plan the day."

This brings me to the first of three messages I'd like to leave you with this afternoon: Strive to maintain balance in your lives.

The events of the past three years have taught us that life is precious and precarious. During your years here, you lived through the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001, the anthrax mailings that followed, wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the emergence of SARS as a threat to global health, and the recent attack on this school.

These events remind us of the need to treasure our lives and to maintain balance in them. I speak here of balance in several respects: between our desire to improve the world and our desire to enjoy it; between our work and our families; and between our professional selves and our personal selves. I'd like to say a word or two about each.

The world needs you. You came to law school, to this law school, in whole or in part, because you wanted to

respond to the world's needs. You're bright, conscientious, capable men and women, and you'll strive to improve the world in many different ways. Some of you will be prosecutors, seeking to rid our communities of drug dealers and violent offenders. Others of you will defend those wrongly accused. Some of you will fight to vindicate the civil and human rights of people in this country and abroad. Others will fight for the environment. Some of you will organize community groups; others will organize corporations, large and small, and work to promote economic efficiency. Two of you, at least, will study to become medical doctors. Some of you will be teachers; others, journalists and writers. Many of you will be judicial clerks, and, in time, some will be judges. Others will be members of Congress and heads of state. Exactly thirty years ago, President Bill Clinton (and Senator Hillary Clinton) graduated from this school. A future president may be in our company today. If so, I wish her well.

You will find your calling within the law (or perhaps outside it) -- that place in which you thrive -- and you will do great things. We need you to do great things. Advance the law and the cause of justice. Fight discrimination and inequality. Help us find difficult solutions to difficult problems.

But remember, it's possible to enjoy the world while working to improve it. Seek out and embrace the beauty in life: the first blooms of spring; the orange glow of the sunlight as it warms the walls of the law school; the laughter of your loved ones. You will do the greatest good for society if you nurture your soul along the way. Love your families. Some of you are headed to the world's top law firms and, no doubt, you will become the best lawyers money can buy. Others of you are headed to legal aid societies and defenders offices, and you will earn the praise of your clients and your communities. But, remember that neither money nor the accolades of your clients will ever replace the love of your family.

When I worked for the legal department of the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe, at five o'clock in the evening, the Tribal Attorney General would ask me: "Does the existence of the universe hinge on what you're doing right now? If not, then go home." He was a big man, six foot four, and imposing, so I went home. Truth be told, there certainly were nights when he and I toiled into the wee hours working on briefs for the tribe. But, he told me to leave at five often enough, and with enough sincerity, that the lesson stayed with me: there is much more to life than work.

Remember that your work does not define who you are. Work hard and do the best you can, but find a psychological balance between your professional and personal selves. Don't give your work too much power over you. It's not who you are. Each of you possesses incredible integrity and character, and a wonderful diversity of interests and talents. We love you for who you are, not for what you've accomplished. Love yourselves in the same way. Paint, dance, run, hike, sing. Take special care of yourselves.

Mahatma Gandhi once said: "You must be the change you wish to see in the world." By working to improve the world, while at the same time enjoying it, cherishing the love of your families, and nourishing your souls, you will be the change you seek in the world.

My second message is simple, and here I speak primarily to those of you who will use your talents in the service of clients: Treat your clients with respect, compassion and humanity.

There are many attributes of a great lawyer. Among them are the ability to think fast on your feet, mastery of the law, and the ability to use the law creatively and intelligently to advance the interests of your clients. But, one of the truest measures of excellence is the respect, compassion and humanity with which a lawyer treats his or her clients.

Your clients often will come to you during times of distress: mothers trying to keep custody of their children; refugees seeking asylum; small business owners trying to revitalize blighted communities; large corporations seeking to expand or contract, often to preserve or create hundreds or thousands of jobs. These clients and others will entrust you with their cases. Listen carefully to their stories. Respond to their needs. Represent them zealously. Champion their causes.

You will meet clients whose cases, although deeply compelling, are complex and demanding, and whose outcomes are unknowable. Have the courage to take those cases. You will also meet clients who are difficult or whose causes are in public disfavor. Take their cases, too, those that others will not touch. And when your clients make decisions with which you disagree, try first to understand them and not to judge. In every case, remain loyal to your clients. Keep their confidences. Treat them with dignity and respect.

For those of you who will become law professors -- and many of you will -- I implore you to continue the commitment to excellence in teaching you learned here. Treat your students with the same dignity and respect you would your clients, nurturing their love of knowledge, just as yours was nurtured here.

My third and final message is this: Believe in yourselves. You are exceptional people, possessing extraordinary abilities and talents. You've received what many believe to be the world's finest legal education. Use your education and your talents for good. Trust yourselves; seek and find wisdom in yourselves, and you will succeed in ways you might have thought impossible.

This is not to say that you won't make mistakes. You will. We all do. But, you will own them, and you will recover from them. Take chances. Don't be afraid to lose. It's better to fight for what you believe in, even if you lose every time, than never to fight at all.

Have the courage to be leaders, but remember that you will never be alone. You will be joined in your work by others who want to achieve the same goals as you: your clients, community organizers, leaders of industry and finance, the associates and partners in your firms. Join together with them, work in cooperation with them, and you will move mountains.

In all that you do, seek out that which ignites the fire of your passion; invest yourself in it, and you will surely leave your mark. And, if your romance with the law ends, have the courage to leave it. You will leave your mark elsewhere.

Remember the values you brought with you to Yale Law School -- the values that made this school a better place -- and remain true to them. You have amazed us with your virtue and skill, and you will continue to amaze us for years and years to come.

So, in conclusion, I ask of you three things: strive to maintain balance in your lives, treat others with the highest respect, and believe in yourselves. With these thoughts, and with my warmest regards, I say to you, the Class of 2003: congratulations and best, best wishes!