

Tuesday, May 24th – 8:08pm

Nine Hopes

On January 13th of this year, I received a most surprising and unexpected missive from Marcia Sells, your Dean of Students, requesting that I might consider speaking to you all on this special and important day in your lives.

I was flattered, delighted, honored, so I immediately said no. I don't think of myself as a conventional speaker for this type of occasion. But after a much heated deliberation between terrified, cowardly me and brave, adventurous me, the better argument won. I said yes. I've also known Marcia since I was eight years old, both of us little girls growing up in Cincinnati, Ohio, and now, as then, I still just want Marcia to like me.

In the days since accepting your gracious invitation, you have all been on my mind. A lot. To the point of distraction. Dominated somewhat by a concern that you really meant to invite Mary Louise Parker, or Camilla Parker Bowles, or Sarah Michelle Gellar, or Neil Patrick Harris. But of course my real and great concern was what would I/could I say to be deserving, nay worthy of such an occasion?

Because you are the 2016 Harvard Law School graduates. A formidable group, a sort of highly impressive noun. A fine noun. Certainly

distinguished. Except generally speaking, in my experience, if you suddenly find yourself in a room facing a large number of lawyers... that's really not a good sign, not a harbinger of good times ahead. Unless of course you're playing a lawyer on TV. Jo Ann Harris? Assistant DA? Equal Justice, anyone?

But gradually, I began to think of you less as a group and more as individuals. The collective part began to break away and reveal, at least in my imagination, each singular person. And there was this comforting and welcome shift when May 25th became not about me but, deservedly, appropriately, about you. About each of you.

So at last we meet. And I finally get to now see all of you extraordinary men and women. And having thought of you all for so long, having struggled to find the right words to inspire you, having been haunted by you, I just want to say ... Get out of my head!

Sincerely, what I have been most looking forward to saying is how enormously proud I am of your accomplishments. And if I am filled with this gushing pride, I can only imagine how your chests swell today, having arrived at this destination. I wish I could shout out your names one by one, but that is reserved for tomorrow. However, it seems a bit of a shame that, after sitting, seriously and attentively, semester after semester to reach this amazing goal, you have to once again listen to someone else talk instead of letting your feelings out.

Wouldn't it be grand, for all of you, isn't it right and good and entirely appropriate, after all you have done, to shout out to me and to the world your own names?

So if you are game, on the count of 3, I want you to shout your name and let it speak for your joy. Be your least modest self. Let the sound of your names be filled with all the feelings that describe these last years of your singular efforts. Okay? On the count of three.

One. Two. Three....

Well done.

I'm Sarah Jessica. It's very nice to meet you.

And good afternoon to Dean Minnow, the Harvard Class Marshals, parents, students, faculty and distinguished guests, President Arena, Professor Jeannie Suk, Gabriela Follett and of course my friend, Dean of Students, Marcia Sells. I thank you all so much for including me today.

Graduates, it is truly a profound honor to celebrate your achievement. And a privilege to be asked to share some thoughts.

As I mentioned, even though we've just met, you have become over these last few months, co-habitants of my life, a great part of my waking thoughts, the interrupter of other thoughts, the ones I should be having, the cause of sleepless nights, a distraction and a beautiful burden. In

other words, you've basically become my children. Which means I'd really love it if you would just simply answer my text when you get to the party or let me know if you aren't coming home tonight. And perhaps now might be the right time to tell you we turned your bedroom into a den/home office.

As parents, our goal is to raise kind, happy, independent people. We want to send our children out into the world to share themselves, to connect, to contribute, to lead rich, complicated, challenging and joyful lives. They must leave to do so.

But thinking of this next chapter of your lives, I want to stand in front of every train that's about to hit you, I want to be there to assure you that you will recover from heartbreak, to convince you on your most blue day that you will not always feel so alone, to remind you not to sacrifice your integrity even when it might feel a much more swift avenue toward your goal, to whisper in your ear that other peoples opinion of you doesn't have to be the opinion you keep of yourself, to encourage you to think twice before saying nothing, to promise the job is coming, the romance around the corner, the full rich life you long for is just up ahead. And that you can indeed have life and literature. However, that would do you no good at all. And we parents and teachers don't really want that. And though at moments that might be tempting for all parties, you don't want that either.

And like my own offspring, I have my hopes and ambitions for you. So

the thoughts I offer you today are the same I offer my own children. Or rather I would offer if I didn't know it would only elicit a sort of tortured rolling of the eyes, like a certain 13 year old in my household. Because when you're young, advice is like experience's boring cousin that no one really wanted to invite and arrives at the party an hour early just hanging around the kitchen, criticizing the food.

But if you'll indulge me, I do have few thoughts. Things I've learned as an actor, a parent, a businessperson, a citizen and as a someone who has had the extraordinary good fortune to pursue the things I love. So I have a list of hopes that I have collected, and that I would like to be able to confer upon you.

May I approach?

1. I hope that you can maintain your individuality.

That you will find a way to continue to be the individual you discovered over these past years as you marched toward this day.

Please remember, even as you get swept by the current of desire, ambition and great satisfaction, it was you alone who sorted all this out. You all did it your own way. You established systems of progress, preparation. Despite the help you may have received along the way it was, in the end, an individual undertaking.

I can share that there have been many attempts from the outside world

to change me. My approach, my appearance, my choices. For the most I have resisted, often to the chagrin of those who believed they had my best interest at heart. They simply wanted to make it easier for me. Lessen the resistance I might find by altering my self. I'm not going to suggest I was evolved enough to see the error in doing so but there was a little voice that said, "Don't. Be gracious, listen, appreciate the care and advice but there are times, Sarah Jessica, to keep your own counsel." As we say in acting, "take the note, but do it your own way." And I continue to believe in "taking the good note, from anyone" but be an original.

So have a deep belief in who you are, what you want to say, what you look like and cling to your sense of self and uniqueness. It's a great thing to know how to belong to oneself. We need, more than ever – we're counting on you -- to bring your big, gorgeous, different, unconventional crazy, surprising, kind, innovative and unfamiliar ideas and selves. That's the energy that will spark the ideas and collaborations that will change the world.

As the beloved author A.A. Milne said about himself: The things that make me different are the things that make me.

2. I hope that you honor and nurture your curiosity.

Curiosity is more powerful than comfort. Comfort is seductive. It envelops you and seems to ask nothing in return. It's necessary on occasion but it can be a beautiful prison.

Curiosity, I'm convinced, is the gateway to everything you know you want. I have found in my own life both professionally and personally that every time I throw myself into an exploration of the unknown, that I let curiosity lead, I receive new and stimulating ideas and relationships that alter the course of my life.

I have a peculiar addiction for any world that's not my own. I want to know as best I can the person most unlike myself, I want to travel to the far-flung region, to better understand the other side, to see, to smell, to experience the foreign, to be uncomfortable, to be the outsider. The most vibrant, engaging and wonderfully exhausting experiences have come from my endless curiosity. I am a better mother, wife, friend and colleague for it.

But that means I am often in a smack down with the brand new, and I'm actually not at all a brave person. Despite what may seem a lack of self awareness, I will tell you that my true nature is timidity. But I know my most valuable asset is my insatiable curiosity, and every time I call upon it, I am awakened.

3. I hope you can know that “to want” is a gift.

We are all different. We come from radically different backgrounds, from all parts of the world; we have our own singular narratives and trajectories. But I think we all recall something we really wanted, pined for, worked toward, put on a list and finally at last earned or received. And the glory when it was ours. I never want to forget that feeling. I

came from a family that struggled financially. My mother was a public school teacher in Southeastern, Ohio, in the foothills of Appalachia. For the most part, as children we had what we needed. But rarely the things we wanted. For many years now, I have recognized that this was and remains a great gift. Because it created in me a hunger, a focused ambition, and a work ethic that is a sort of point of operation and pride for me. Despite the successes you are sure to achieve material or otherwise, never stop wanting. In wanting is energy, surprise, youth and motion. In not wanting is inertia.

4. I hope you will be dreamers.

Not just dreamers, but big dreamers. Dreamers of the “what-ifs” that seem on the surface impossible but which hold the promise of great joy and wonderment and justice. I wholeheartedly disagree with the definition of dreamer as one who lives in fantasy, is impractical or unrealistic. I much prefer the definition of dreamer as one who is considered audacious or visionary.

First of all, dreaming is one of the most relaxing, restorative, wonderfully private occupiers of time. Secondly, dreaming holds the capacity to beautifully suspend time, because there are no limits.

That said, however, avoid the dangers of what in the theater we call being too result oriented - a limiting and deceptive principle- it becomes the most unwelcome and vigilant sort of spam filter. I describe it this way: creating the ending first. It forces you onto a one-way road. A creative cul-de-sac, with no route for exploration, for the unexpected. You cannot produce a truly original thought or innovative thinking if

you are backing into an idea with blinders on. Keep your field of vision wide, so that dreams may lead to other dreams. But here's the rub – it's not going to be a straight line. There are detours that necessity will dictate along the way. I've had many in my own life you can probably name – bad movies or TV shows I did to pay rent, to eat. But I refused to let those less than inspiring deviations erode my greater goals. At times, I felt very disheartened and a deep sense of disillusionment, but I was vigilant about hanging on to my dream. So I implore you not to give up. Even in the face of unthinkable discouragement. Keep your greatest desires in safe shelter, and marry your dreams to action.

5. I hope that you learn to wrangle your fears.

Don't try to vanquish them. Personally, I seem to encounter fear a lot. I'm like a heat seeking missile for fear. I'm on a constant blind date with fear. It often brings along its good friend anxiety. I used to never talk about this. I was convinced that to admit to the fear out loud would only strengthen and embolden it. So I became expert at the shove, the dismissal. But I found it had legs and stamina. In fact, the more I tried to contain it, the more powerful it became. As if it was nourishing itself on my resistance. So one day, I chose to address it formally: "Hello fear." And the modest act of acknowledging it was like putting a tiny needle in an over-inflated balloon. That simple act of speaking its name gave me charge. So I encourage you to capture your fear. Harness it. Direct it. Talk about it. You will find solidarity with others. Because come on, show of hands, who's sorta, kinda terrified 24 hours a day?

6. I hope you recognize the strength that can come from disappointment.

Living disappointment can be brutal. It knocks you sideways, it's a kick in the rubber parts, it's a low-grade chronic stomachache. It feels lonely. And awful. And unfair. But an outcome that can make you feel that lousy was surely worth your efforts. So feel it, lounge in it. Suffer. Stay in bed, indulge. Invite your friends over, eat too much, weep, moan. Push on the bruise. For two days. Then rally. You will look back with fondness and even with romance at those occasions. You will laugh and most importantly be proud of what you did next. How it prepared you for the next disappointment. And you will learn that no matter how gutted, there is recovery. You will see the coping mechanisms you develop, the empathy you cultivate, how it makes you a better friend, partner, employee, employer, person.

7. I hope you treasure the accumulation of the triumphs the world doesn't see.

I spent years auditioning for roles. Pounding the pavement. I got some jobs, I didn't get others. I was a journeyman and I loved it. Every now and then I am asked by young actors for advice. And I give the same advice to my son, whom to our great delight we have discovered is a serious student. I tell them, prepare. Prepare, but don't plan. Do everything within your means to be as informed as is possible. It's the process that is most important. I say give the best audition you can. Walk in with confidence that you have something to offer. And afterwards, lay in bed at night knowing you did all you could within

your resources to be ready. The goal is to feel good when you walk out the door of that audition. It's the little triumphs the world can't see that add up. That stick. That give you sustenance. It's the every effort that makes you better, regardless of immediate reward. It has been my quiet, private triumphs, even when I didn't get the part, which have guided me to my own personal success.

8. I hope that you will always know that listening is your secret weapon.

It is a demanding technique, and can be particularly challenging for smart people who have so much to share. It requires an exhausting rigor and discipline, especially when faced with those whose opinions and ideology is anathema. By listening with a clear head and open heart we can plant seeds of empathy and show others the most formidable armor is knowledge and respect.

9. I hope you can distinguish the bad rules from the good ones.

There used to be a blueprint. A set of recognized and reliable pathways, rules that determined our careers, our expectations, and sometimes our future. But – and I don't have to tell you -- the world has changed. We live in a time of unpredictability, instability, where change is common currency and many of the old rules don't apply. Speaking as a bit of a rule breaker I'm grateful for the absence of some of these more traditional rules of life. Rules that were used to define us from the outside, that characterized us by gender or class or race or orientation and were used to limit our value, ambitions and contributions. I would

call these bad rules.

But there is a rule for which I'm particularly grateful and which deep in my heart I believe to be timeless and indisputable: The golden rule. Maybe that seems corny or naïve. I don't mind. I would much rather risk the accusation of being naïve than shield myself in the comfortable confidence of cynicism.

So as you re-draw a path for your generation, I urge that you rely upon decency, principle and nobility. They aren't qualities that we herald lately. We seem to have a great deal more interest in the stories of success. There is much ink spilled these days (well, some ink and much blogging) that grab our limited attention by celebrating matters of money, fame and status. But success can and should mean being a trusted friend, partner and collaborator. Being a person with a steady sense of goodness and a reliable compass pointing towards the humane and empathetic.

I say without hesitation or embarrassment: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. I fall short of this destination at times, but it's still the hook on which I hang my hat. It remains my beacon. The only rule I can always count on. And ultimately I believe it's what gives us the most meaningful success: the admiration and trust of those whose lives we touch. At the end of the day, all we have is our honor.

So there you have it. My nine hopes. I bet your hope is that I'm

wrapping this up soon.

But it occurs to me, that there is a certain theme here to these hopes and it connects both my world in the arts and yours in law. And that is at its heart, in its very essence and purpose, our work is about people. Human beings. The beauty of a dramatic moment or perfectly-reasoned argument is irrelevant if it lives in world separate from the people it effects.

And there's a certain larger context in which these hopes exist that we can't and shouldn't ignore.

I know that these past few years, as students, as citizens, you have been involved in an unusual amount of challenges, change and the struggle for change. In many ways, the power and recognition of and the resistance to change has defined our decade and century. Change, of course, is not always pleasant. It is certainly not always easy. But whether we like it or not, change is and will always be the natural state of the world.

Which is why the possibility of change, of transformation, is the central dilemma of the great philosophies. Of the great religions. Of art. And, of course, of law. Change is what we simultaneously hope for and fear. It is both the corridor to all that is better and the last corner we turn.

Not all change, of course, is to be celebrated. When we get sick, and our bodies seem to turn against us, that's change we fight against. We employ every resource to counteract it and regain our strength. To return to something like our our former happy state.

I think we all recognize that there is a sort of illness at loose in the world at the moment. Not an illness of decay, or disrepair. It is far more insidious than that. It is an illness borne of fear and is metastasizing in our political body, breaking down our sense of compassion, of understanding, of acceptance. Our ability to see each other as human.

So I urge you to take what you can of these hopes. To attach them to the skills you have acquired and use them to help us. Help guide us through these fears towards and through change. To do whatever you can to shape the world as a place that does lean towards justice and compassion.

It's a big dream. Nine hopes wrapped in one mighty dream. But if you capture the energy and intelligence you have and allow it to benefit others, if you grant yourself the joy of discovering that when you give greedily the returns can be monumental, well then, I have every confidence in you.

The world anticipates and is in vital need of your next move. Be bold, be generous. Throw yourself toward the unfamiliar. Let curiosity be your guide. After all, look at what you just did. You came here, individuals

from all over the world, you worked alone or you found groups, you ate when you needed to, you slept when you could, you overcame every possible obstacle thrown in your path, whether by yourself or academic demands, you fought exhaustion, insecurities and time. You found a community, you found a home and most importantly, you found yourself.

The world of law awaits your good sense, your unique perspective, and your careful consideration. Art, culture, politics, community and the larger world beckon for your head and your heart. I know you are ready. The people rest.