

Tim Wu Commencement Address

UConn School of Law, 2015

Well, I want to begin by thanking the dean for giving a better summary of my work than I ever have and also for inviting me to speak. More formally, Dean Fisher and members of the faculty, graduates of the class of 2015, their friends and family, it is my great pleasure to celebrate with you your accomplishment, your real accomplishment of graduating with a juris doctor degree from the University of Connecticut.

I would say even in our relatively jaded times that graduating law school cannot fail to be a moment of serious pride. You know, it's one thing to graduate from college; that's exciting, but graduating from law school is so much more. I mean, you get, if you want to, you can put esquire after your name. You now speak more random pieces of Latin than anyone outside of probably a Catholic priest or a classics scholar. *Res ipsa loquitur, per se*. All these things are familiar to you. In a certain way, once you graduate from law school, once you become a lawyer, you actually can never go back. You can never ever again look at the word "reasonable" the way a reasonable person does. Words like "jurisdiction" or "the rule against perpetuities." They have this meaning, and it's too late. Sorry. You cannot ever go back.

In my remarks today, it may either relieve you or disappoint you that I'm not really going to talk about the Internet or net neutrality or anything like that. Rather, I'm going to talk about the next five years of your lives. And graduates, I would have to say the next five years are really probably going to be the most formative in your life. There may have been a time when all uncertainty disappeared for life as soon as you got a law degree, but we don't live in those kinds of times. We live in times of uncertainty, and I think there's no reason to deny that. And also, you may be one of these people, I certainly was one of them, who...I want to say there's two kinds of law students. There's some people who very clearly know what they want to do with their life and have it kind of mapped out. I was certainly not one of those kind of people, and there's another kind of person who has done everything possible to put off decisions for a very long time. And, if you're that kind of person, I suspect the next five years is going to become a period where you're really going to start making serious decisions about your career. So the next five years, I'm going to suggest, will be challenging but approached a certain way will be some of the most fruitful and meaningful parts of your life.

So, as I said earlier, when I was in law school, I was in the second camp of law students who didn't really have a sense of what they wanted to do or why they were in law school or what was going on. I had some ideas. Actually, I had a really bad idea. I had this idea that I wanted to be an international lawyer. Now, I should say that I had no particular...I didn't actually know any lawyers in undergraduate. I had no idea what an international lawyer was, but I had this idea that that was what I wanted to be, and I think it was mainly based on the idea that you got to travel for free. I was talking over this with Alexi, otherwise known as Professor Lahav last night, we were talking about how as law students, somehow that seemed like the most important thing. Like more important than a career, more important than doing good for the public was getting on a plane for free. Somehow the concept of...I don't know, so...I had this idea: Going to

travel around and maybe somehow going to Asia and sit in a conference room. Imagine in glass and steel and speaking multiple languages at once. All of these things seemed really nice, though the word international itself seemed to perfume the air. You know, add kind of a glamour to what was generally paper shoveling. Now, the weird thing about this sort of fixation or obsession with international lawyering that I had is actually I had no qualifications for that job at all, and in fact was in reality something of a computer geek and a science guy. Yet, somehow, for some reason, it did not occur to me that my existing skills, that the things I was actually good at, ought be something I would make my career in. That very obvious point never honestly occurred to me. I had this fascination, which is a dangerous fascination, with things I was not good at. Things I did not know. Now, you know, there's some room for tourism and so forth, but I want to suggest that for your career that the fascination with things you are actually bad at is something you need to drop. And, so I'm going to arrive at the first of my sort of three mini lessons or points in the speech. And that is this: Your career in the law will be an awfully lot easier, more enjoyable, if you happen to end up doing things you are good at. I mean, I can simplify it as, find out what you are good at and do that.

Now, I know that that sounds in some tension with the idea usually expressed in college graduations that you should follow your heart. I'll say one or two things about that. One: that this is law school, not college, but also, second, that the two ideas aren't necessarily that contradictory because the things you love are often very vague. Maybe you like business, or maybe you like entertainment, maybe you have some better reason than me to like international law. But what people are good at is not an area; it's usually an individual skill or some attribute you have. And this lends me to my second of my points for the next two years: It is important, if possible, to be very honest with yourself about what you are good at and what you are not good at, which is challenging as it takes some self-reflection and so forth.

But the things people are good at tend to take the form of a verb. Maybe something like "writing, organizing, presenting." I often think that it's often useful to think about a job and divide it into what are actually the verbs. Not what does it sounds like, you know, what is the general feel, but what do you actually do day to day. And the fact is that lawyers can be successful with all kinds of skills. I mean, perhaps, I'm just giving examples, maybe you're very hard working. Sort of like a marathoner; that's very actually common among lawyers and an incredibly useful talent if you have it. Some people are very naturally social; they can walk into a crowd, everyone's like "you know, I really like that guy." You know, you shake hands well. Sounds a little more like business school, actually. But that is a skill some people have and some people have less of it. Maybe you're very organized; incredibly useful skill. You can run a highly complex project. Maybe what you have is that everyone notices that you see things differently than other people. You come at a problem very differently, or maybe you can just solve really hard problems. Sometimes the talent is that you combine two things that are rarely ever bound together. Like being a tax lawyer who can make normal conversation. So, that was our last dean, actually; he had those two skills.

So, if you compare this to sports, people in sports understand this very well. If you're someone who's seven foot tall, and you play center in basketball, you don't secretly long to be a point

guard or something like that. You don't see sprinters like Usain Bolt trying to sweat out the marathon. You know, Usain Bolt's a very interesting guy because opposed to lawyers who have billable hours, he has billable seconds. Got nine of them in one day and is done. Anyway, the point of this is that it's very easy to understand; I think we all can tell, if you're active at all, where your physical talents lie, but you should do the same kind of thing when you approach your career in law. Take a long look, from noticing feedback and so forth, what am I good at?

So, how do you find out as a lawyer where you belong? You'll find out as you talk to lawyers that most of them often have one or two turning points. I'll talk a little bit about some of mine. So, I did try this idea of being an international lawyer. I got a free flight to Hong Kong; pretty excited about that. There I was in a glass and steel tower, was ready and had a nice office and everything, but then I guess it took about a week, maybe two days, before I realized I was really, really bad at the job. This was project financing, it sounded very nice, project finance building power plants in China or something. But what it meant in practice, the job was raising money for foreign companies in the United States and it required keeping track of an enormous number of documents, making sure they were done right, and kind of keeping the whole project together, and it was something I was not good at at all. Maybe that's why I'm in academia. In fact, it was pretty clear to me. I had a moment where I was sitting there and I realized that not only was I worse at this job than the lawyers, I was also probably worse at it than most of the secretaries, paralegals, and frankly had less value to anyone in that office, even below the guy who delivered the sandwiches, who everyone seemed to like. It was clear to me, and I remember that I was sitting there realizing this and you know when you feel it, you'll know it. This is not interesting me or I'm not good at this.

The other thing, the next year, maybe the same year, I took a class in intellectual property and a class in Internet law, cyber law it was called back then. And the class seemed so easy I thought there was a mistake. You know, I wrote the exam and was "that was like a joke; what do you mean. That was too easy." And in some ways, I had that problem again because I assumed it wasn't a useful thing I could do with my life. But when you notice something is just easy to you and easier than other people, when you notice when you're at the end of the class and you haven't even broken a sweat and other people seem to find it challenging, maybe that's a little bit of a sign. Whatever it is, again. Looking for that information, what am I good at, because it's not always that obvious.

Now, I should add some caveats to that. You know, to get your foot in the door, you sometimes have to start doing stuff you don't necessarily want to do. And it's often true that the work in law, at the bottom, is not as interesting or exciting as the work further on, so there's... I mean, I gave it a week and maybe that's too impatient, but you should sometimes hold it out a little bit longer. Also, sometimes something is hard, but you can develop this instinct. There's this distinction between "I'm not good at this now but someday I could be good at this" versus "I'm not good at this now and this just doesn't work for me." It's this subtle thing, and I can't really tell you how to parse that difference but that is kind of the challenge over the next five years. I'll say that when I ran for office last summer that I learned some of these lessons again because running for office was like back to ground zero.

This happens a lot in your career; you reach a new stage and it's back to ground zero. You know, many people will practice law for awhile. Maybe they'll go in house and then suddenly it's a whole new set of skills maybe or different sets of skills, so this keeps happening and the same learning the skills is a big point. And I noticed that politics involved a number of skills, one of which is you had to run to a room of strangers and shake everybody's hands and actually it's a skill. And also things like being on television a lot, and I realized that on television, I had to admit to myself quite early on that I was terrible at it. That somehow I got very nervous in front of the TV, but I worked on it. I thought there is potential; you know, I do a lot of public speaking and can sort of learn to relax and basically what I learned to do with television is that you have to make your sentences much shorter. That was the end [noise] get to the point and go on.

Anyways, I want to say, many years out of law school, I think you'll find this in five years from now, it is amazing what people end up doing. You know, in some ways, unpredictable. There was one woman I know who was quite flighty; she had trouble finding work, didn't have a job, I remember. Fond of the drink, I'll say that. Somehow, she found the field of bankruptcy. I don't know why, and she loved bankruptcy. Moved to Seattle and made partner in a prominent bankruptcy firm. I don't know; she just found bankruptcy. Another of our classmates, name was Samantha Power, she was kind of a radical, human rights type, disdained everything, you know. She liked to drink toasts to the downfall of the bourgeoisie and things like that. She'd been a freelance reporter in Bosnia; very cool or whatever. Stuck with human rights. At some point, she kind of changed, became very political, went to work in the White House, and now is the United Nations State Ambassador, you know, the US ambassador to the United Nations as we speak. And I would've never expected that; she was just completely an anti-institutional kind of person, and now she is within an institution.

So, getting back to my point is that I hope that you see all the jobs, all the times over the next five years in some lens of both finding a career and making a living and so forth but also experiments where you are learning about yourself and learning what in a career, what in a job works for you. What makes you happy, and I would aim less for like this, like every single moment of my life is bliss because that is pretty rare in a job, even in a really good...in fact, it's impossible. Maybe the Dalai Lama has that feeling, but I bet he's got paperwork and stuff he's got to do. So, I wouldn't aim for "oh my goodness, this is like the most...", it would be like "this works. This is satisfying. I can do this. You know, I can see myself comfortably doing this for a long period and I go home and feel a sense of satisfaction." That is what I really think is ...is that feeling to look for. And if you can find that then you know you've got something really...I'm good at this and it's satisfying. So, let me move to my real last of three points.

I want to say to you, the graduates, that in completing both this law degree and your college degree, of course, you have already proven that you can face a challenge. And you have proven that you can beat it. It takes a measure of discipline and perseverance to get through college, to get through the JD degree, and I want to say that whatever skills got you this far will get you over the next five years and will guarantee your success in the world if you listen to

what you are good at. So, I want to offer my congratulations again, and I want to welcome you to the ranks of men and women who are learned in the law. Thank you very much.