

Keynote Address
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When our fabulous Dean invited me to deliver the keynote address at this luncheon, he said that it would allow me an opportunity to give alumni and guests "a retrospective of over two decades" of my career on the bench. Making full use of Chief Judge's prerogative, I've decided to go back even farther and share six of my Life Lessons with you.

Lesson One

Lesson Number One begins in Monticello, New York, the village at the foot of the Catskill Mountains where I was born. My parents were both immigrants from Eastern Europe, who were first farmers, and later shopkeepers in Monticello. We lived on the outskirts of Monticello, where I attended a one-room schoolhouse. Whatever image you may have about one-room schoolhouses, for me it was a life-altering experience that allowed me ultimately to skip two grades when I transferred to public school. That meant that I finished high school at age 15, when I left Monticello to attend Barnard College in New York City, where I have remained ever since. You cannot image the enormity of the adjustment from Monticello to the sophistication of Manhattan. Still I remember the inkblot test they gave

entering Barnard freshmen. I saw a rooster--and I knew roosters. The person next to me wrote (this was not a competitive test) "Dante's Inferno." To this day I have not seen "Dante's Inferno."

Looking back, I think the single luckiest thing that happened to me at Barnard College, maybe in my entire life, is that I came down with the mumps at the start of the first-year exam period. At the time, I was embarrassed and devastated, but fortunately I had to miss all my exams, and didn't make them up for years. But for the mumps, I likely would have flunked everything and been back in Monticello for good.

So Lesson Number One, an essential life lesson for the Chief Judge: a little adversity sometimes can turn into a blessing.

Lesson Two

Though I had brief infatuations with a variety of careers, in high school I made the decision to be a journalist. I knew with certainty that one day I would be a media mogul, a prize-winning maker and shaper of world opinion. After all, could the editor-in-chief of the Monticello High School newspaper possibly miss?

At Barnard, as one of only two Latin American Studies majors, I was modestly fluent in Spanish and Portuguese--neither

of which was spoken to any noticeable degree in Monticello. At graduation, I had become, in my parents' eyes, only unemployable. But I saw myself even more precisely as a journalist making and shaping world opinion in the capitals of Latin America. Still I had no job and no husband--and even worse back then, no prospect for either. But could the editor-in-chief of the Barnard Bulletin possibly miss?

Well, I could--and I did. After long searching and innumerable rejections, ultimately I found a job as a social reporter for The Hudson Dispatch in Union City, New Jersey, reporting weddings, church socials and women's club meetings, six days a week 2 to 11 p.m. Not the stuff of Pulitzer Prizes.

Before long, I knew this wasn't working so I began to rethink my life and, in desperation, enrolled at the Law School at night--yes, NYU night law school--with a day job editing copy for a feature syndicate. My sole ambition was to get off the social page. Law school seemed a sure-fire way in the 1960s for a woman to be taken seriously in the tough, closed, male-dominated profession of journalism. It never crossed my mind that I would ever actually practice law.

And that's how I learned my second life lesson: Every now and then it's good to go back to Square One and reconsider the

life course you're on. You just shouldn't be doing things that are meaningless to you.

Lesson Three

Many, many life lessons I learned from my beloved alma mater, over our wonderful decades-long association. But the third has been an especially important one.

With a demanding daytime journalism job, for me night law school was hardly a breeze. The class was largely populated by accountants yearning to be tax lawyers and engineers yearning to be patent lawyers, and my assigned seat in both Contracts and Civil Procedure happened to be right next to the class genius, a particularly brilliant engineer who knew all the answers. That first year there were only a couple of midterm exams--and Contracts, particularly befuddling to me--fortunately was not one of them. When the grades came back on Delmar Karlen's mid-year Civil Procedure exam, my brilliant engineer friend and I were both shocked: my grade was at the top of the class, his at the bottom. He was convinced that a grievous error had been made. But we later learned what the problem was. He had written flawlessly about the law of contracts, which was the context of the exam hypothetical. My response was about the credibility of witnesses.

And there it was: Life Lesson Number Three. Before you go spouting off on a subject, first be sure you know what the topic of the discussion is. When the subject is Civil Procedure, don't talk about the law of Contracts.

Lesson Four

The fact is, I loved the law from the start. It had some of the same qualities that drew me to journalism--involvement in current affairs, an endless variety of intellectual challenge, the chance to shape public opinion. But even better, law offered an opportunity to help human beings. And like journalism, the ranks were pretty solidly closed to women.

The career path for the men in my law school class was clear: they would enter a law firm, or corporation, or government service, and proceed straight to the top: managing partner, general counsel, district attorney, corporate president, commissioner, senator. Not so for women lawyers, few as we were in the early 1960s. No welcome mat. No beaten paths. Always barriers. Always crossroads.

At first, it was near-impossible to find a job. Among law firms there always were concerns about what clients would say; about how we should behave, and dress; about out-of-town travel and long hours. "Our quota of women is filled" was a common response among the firms--meaning they had one: a woman, or a

quota, or both. I never asked. Naturally, I aimed for one of the completely impenetrable Wall Street firms. My wonderful law school classmate Roberta Karmel repeatedly asked me: "Judy, why are you doing this? They don't want us!"

After scores of rejections, ultimately I was hired by the venerable New York City law firm of Sullivan & Cromwell--the only female in its Litigation Department. Departmental meetings began, "Gentlemen and Judy." Why on Earth Sullivan & Cromwell hired me is one of the great mysteries, and great joys, of my life.

So there's my fourth Life Lesson--mine and Yogi Berra's: When you reach a crossroads, take it. It's no time to pause for reflection, or be timid, or ask too many questions, or study the odds. Just go for it!

Lesson Five

By the time I joined Sullivan & Cromwell in 1962, all the women lawyers in all the Wall Street law firms could barely fill a table at a restaurant. Of course we didn't have the privilege of membership in the downtown clubs, and when invited there as guests, we had to use special entrances. Court appearances, few in number, were of storybook quality.

After two years at Sullivan & Cromwell, I worked as in-house counsel at IBM, then part-time through three pregnancies--

first at NYU Law School and then at the mid-size commercial law firm, Olwine Connelly. I became a partner at the Olwine firm, and remained with the firm as a litigator for 15 very good years until the miracle of my appointment to the Court of Appeals of the State of New York in 1983.

I have now marked 23-plus years as a Judge of the State's highest court, a few weeks shy of 14 of those years as Chief Judge, a position which, in New York State, is both judicial (Chief Judge of the Court of Appeals) and executive (Chief Judge of the State of New York). All 23-plus years, but especially these recent years as Chief Judge, have without question been the greatest years of my professional life. Let me assure you, there's nothing that comes close to the privilege of being Chief Judge. It is very, very good to be the Chief Judge.

Especially now, with my reappointment pending and even then only a relatively short term remaining, naturally I've been doing a fair amount of reflection. Of the many high points I would enjoy discussing today, I'd like to mention just two from my executive Chief Judge role, because they best exemplify Life Lessons Five and Six.

First, there are so many wonderful reforms we've been able to achieve in the operation of the New York State court system-- and the "we" I refer to starts with our absolutely outstanding

Chief Administrative Judge, NYU alum Jonathan Lippman, and great judges and staff, many of them also NYU alumni, many of them present in the audience today.

Were I forced under pain of death (or a loudly ticking clock) to name only one such measure it would be jury reform, which for me began at the start of my term, continues to this very day, and I am confident will never end. The jury system is, after all, a singular opportunity for us to show the public, one person at a time, that our justice system works well. We have to seize it. In the New York State courts, we call more than 650,000 potential jurors every year. That's a lot of opportunity to win public trust and confidence. That's the Chief Judge's official reason for starting with jury reform. The unofficial reason is that, many years ago, my NYU Law School graduate daughter, Luisa (who is here today) called me during a break from her jury service to say: "Mom, this is a great place to meet guys." Immediately I resolved to expand the array.

So we began the process with a commission of lawyers, judges and members of the public, chaired by now-United State District Judge Colleen McMahon, who within six months handed me a terrific blueprint for reform. Indeed, the Commission process has been a hallmark of my years as Chief Judge--an extraordinary route to effective reform throughout our court system, including

commercial courts, drug courts, matrimonials, fiduciaries, judicial elections, indigent defense, internet access to court records and many more. The reports we have received from these Commissions have been nothing short of breathtaking. And what they recommend, we do.

And that leads me to Life Lesson Number 5, which echoes Margaret Mead's advice: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed people can change the world. It is the only thing that ever has."

Lesson Six

My last life lesson, number six, focuses on a different aspect of my Chief Judge role, and that is the impact on the courts of societal change that surrounds us. We all have a similar challenge in everything we do: how to remain relevant and, in our case, how best to serve the public in a changing world. For the courts in particular the challenge is complicated by the need for stability and continuity in the law that guides people's expectations, and indeed guides the way we conduct our business.

Just to give a quick example of profound change affecting the courts, consider the drug epidemic and its impact on our criminal court and family court dockets. Probably three-quarters or more of our criminal cases are drug-driven, many of them low-

level offenders committing nonviolent crimes again and again and again simply to support a drug habit. Or consider the huge child neglect and abuse dockets, and record numbers of children being removed from homes to foster care limbo. Or consider the modern-day scourge of domestic violence--it still astounds me that we have tens of thousands of domestic violence cases a year in the New York State courts. Shortly after I became Chief Judge back in 1993, I received an unforgettable lesson in domestic violence: two murder-suicides, in each case with the female victim holding a court-issued Order of Protection in her pocket. There was a public outcry: "Do something."

Well, I'm proud to say we have done something--we have done a lot. Today in New York State we have 152 Drug Courts, offering rehabilitation instead of jail; we have Family Drug Courts to speed rehabilitation and avoid the need to terminate parental rights; and Juvenile Drug Courts for vulnerable teenagers. We have Integrated Domestic Violence Courts throughout the State focused on victim safety and offender accountability; we have Mental Health Courts to reroute people in need of treatment from prison; we have Community Courts and Re-Entry Courts and many more specialty courts, and best of all we have a Center for Court Innovation, a Research and Development

arm to help us think through these new approaches to delivering justice.

Are those without controversy? Of course not. Nothing worthwhile in life is. And always we are--as we must be--sensitive to the criticisms when they are valid. But we also have tremendous antidotes: the thanks of people who have been served by these courts, and have been able to turn their lives from the downward spiral they were on; the enthusiasm of our judges who say, "This is what I became a judge to do"; and nationwide and worldwide interest in replicating our courts.

But most sustaining of all is Life Lesson Number Six, the words of the late South African lawyer, soldier, statesman General Jan Christian Smuts:

"When enlisted in a good cause, never surrender, for you can never tell what morning reinforcements will come marching over the hilltop."

Time after time the morning reinforcements have come marching over the hilltop, and they have been fabulous. They're there for you too.

And in the end, maybe--just maybe--my profoundest, most heartfelt message today is simply one of boundless gratitude to my friends and colleagues but above all to my magnificent alma mater--its great deans, administrators, faculty, staff and

alumni--for providing me with the skills and nurturing the dream
that have made this extraordinary life possible.