

CHARGE TO THE CLASS OF 2015
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My job now is to “charge” the class of 2015, to give the class a last message before we send them on their way. This charge is aimed at the graduates, and it speaks particularly to their experiences, but let me say to all here who are not graduates: Thank you for helping make these graduates who they are, thank you for supporting them, and thank you for sharing them with us. They are inspiring and funny and skilled and kind and charming and memorable and talented and smart and wise -- all at once. We have been privileged to teach them and we are bursting with pride to be able to call them our own.

To the graduates: This is the third charge I have written for a graduating class. And, to be honest, it’s been the hardest one to write.

One reason is that most of you JD students sitting out there feel like classmates to me. We came to Stanford Law at exactly the same time and we learned about this place together. Most of us had not yet heard the bizarre acronyms that pepper the Stanford vocabulary, we knew nothing about Law Talk and its ways, we had not yet learned how to find a room number when it might have three different building locations. (Take room 230—is that on the second floor of Neukom, on the second floor of the library building, or on the second floor of the classroom building?) We did not yet know about open mike night, about flurries of emails reporting that food was available outside of room 290, and most of us knew nothing about the Stanford band (I *still* do not understand the Stanford band). I don’t know about you, but “innovative” and “entrepreneurial” and “space” (as in “I know people working in that *space*”) are not words I had used much. Together, we went from initiates to pros. I have relished these three years right along with you. But because we came up together, it is bittersweet to see you walk across the stage today.

It’s also the hardest one yet because . . . well, this has just been a hard year. The world we live in has so many challenges. From worrying over the future viability of the planet we live on, to the ways that we fail to treat each other with dignity and respect based on our differences, to the vastly different life chances of those of us *with* luck and privilege and those *without* them. All of these challenges seem more present in these last years. Campuses across the country have had deep conflicts over politics, obligations to future generations, morality, human rights, sexual identity, racial prejudice, and sexual assault

But however hard this has been, it’s been a **really** hard year to be studying law and the legal system, and learning to be a lawyer. All of you came to law school with optimism about the promise of law and the legal system. I read enough admissions files to know that. For many of you sitting here today, though, that faith has been shaken, deeply so, by what you have seen and what you have experienced this year –

particularly the role that racial prejudice and collective indifference continue to play in the lives of so many people of color, and in the cruelty and brutality of our criminal justice system.

I want to talk about what to do if your faith has been shaken. You all have ambitions for the contributions you will make in your careers, for the kind of community you will help create. What do you do if you lose faith that you will accomplish what you hope? Some of you have felt despair this year and wondered whether you should be doing what you are doing. That has not been all of you, but I suspect that many of you are likely to face some point in your life when it seems that the career, the community or the world that you would like to see is not to be, and you will wonder why you are doing what you are doing.

Now, I do have to admit that I can hear my 89-year old mother saying: “But, that is such a *bummer* of a topic.” I know, I know. But stay with me! I have some ideas and I hope some inspiration.

The first and most important imperative is obvious, if sometimes hard to do. **Engage.** It might be difficult, but you must get yourself to **act**. There are many ways to do it—participate, advocate for change, lead—and, given your education, you possess an amazing set of tools that give you a way of thinking and acting. Really, what choice do you have?

It might help to think of the many who came before you who engaged when it must have seemed hopeless. Imagine Justices Ginsburg and O’Connor—offered jobs as legal secretaries when they began their careers. Think of those brave and brilliant lawyers who systematically attacked state-sponsored racial segregation. And there are many today who find it in themselves to engage in the face of overwhelming odds. Afam Onyema is our graduate who runs a nonprofit aimed at getting life-changing medical care to Nigerians. Nigeria happens to be, statistically, one of the worst places in the world to be born because of the state of the basic medical care. His goal is to build a state-of-the art hospital, and for now the nonprofit runs medical missions and maternal and child-health programs and they make progress 10 to 20 to 30 patients at a time. These examples might seem daunting because they are all of exceptional individuals. But can’t all of you think of someone who is not larger than life, someone who has engaged and made everyone around them better off? Take a lesson from them.

The second idea is to find **community, a connection with others.** In looking for inspiration for this speech called a “charge,” I have been reading about the military history of the charge—that is, when troops rush an enemy in order to overcome them. The charge has an interesting history, dating at least to the Greek phalanx, which conducted its charge through an orderly march followed by a run at the enemy. There are all sorts of strategies—head on, around the side, from behind—and many different tools—the cavalry, the bayonet, the bow. But what, at its most basic level, a charge requires is a **group** with a shared goal working together to

accomplish a mission. For you, it could be a community of two, or a movement of thousands—it will help you achieve what you want to achieve, and, more than that, it will support and nourish you.

Finally, **change the question.** If you lose hope, look again at the problem. Is there another way of understanding it? Can you find a different piece of it on which to make progress? We have all had the experience of beating our head against the wall, failing to find the solution. And then we change something about our perspective—we talk to someone new, we change the focus, we learn of an unusual example, we think about it from the opposite perspective—and something emerges. Probably my favorite example of this is the emergence of modern migraine medications. The headache, it was long thought, was caused by the constriction of blood vessels; therefore medications to remedy headaches were aimed at dilating blood vessels. Turns out, the migraine may work in exactly the opposite way. Someone decided to try medications that, as a treatment, constricted blood vessels and the modern (and revolutionary) migraine medication was born.

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So if your faith is shaken, if you think it's not worth it to keep working for what you seek, find a way to stay engaged, create your own phalanx, and take another look at what you are after.

And here's the inspiration. You have done *every single one of these things*, many times over, since you got here. (That's why I asked you to "*stay with me*" on this topic.)

Let me remind you of something I told you at orientation. I told you that we had searched far and wide to find you and worked hard to convince you to join us because we deeply care about which students join us at Stanford Law. Why? Well, we aimed to teach you, but we know that you would teach *us*, would change who we are and what we do. Stanford Law is a collective enterprise – some members are permanent residents, it is true, but the ever-changing group of students are anchor tenants too.

In your time here, you have engaged like mad, you have created community worthy of charging the field, and you have taken a second (and third and fourth) look at everything. Some of you have taken these actions in the face of a real crisis of faith in the legal system. You helped hold a die-in in December, an incredible My Life Mattered event, and facilitated countless conversations.

You have founded new organizations, held conferences, created a new journal, traveled overseas to compete and to learn. Your interests have led to new classes, new policy labs, reading groups, and initiatives. You have created new social events, new creative outlets, and new service opportunities.

When you joined us, I told you we picked you and we recruited you because we knew you would change us for the better. And you have. So, if your faith is shaken, remember what you as a class did in your time here, and use that as your model. Keep doing what you have been doing here. I know you will. Now **get to it!**