A Bold, And Happy, Lawyer

Martha Nussbaum
Ernst Freund Distinguished Service Professor of Law and Ethics
University of Chicago Law School

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Graduates of the class of 2010, all our warmest congratulations go out to you and your loved ones on this happy day. You have completed a rigorous education at our great law school, and you are embarking on a wide range of exciting careers. What to say to a group so high achieving, with such promise in store?

When Dean Schill invited me to give this talk, he must have known that I would find some way to talk about the ancient Greek philosophers. Perhaps, though, he would not have expected me to choose one of the most shocking and countercultural of them all, Hipparchia. I think we may fairly call her a lawyer as well, since philosophers in

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She established goals first and then somehow came up with the money to pursue them. Applicants to law school typically list a wider range of career plans than those that they actually pursue after they graduate. The reality of debt and the chilling effect of the recent financial crisis now seem to be influencing choices even during law school itself, as people pursue “safe” courses that lead naturally to remunerative jobs. It requires courage to stick with a plan to do public service or some other relatively low-pay option or to explore a new and risky path. But if that is what you really want to do, no salary is worth the sacrifice. And if that is what you used to want to do, ask yourself, in a quiet moment, whether you have changed course for reasons internal to your own life plan or for merely extrinsic reasons.

1. Don’t follow a path just because that is what people expect of you. Follow your own path. Hipparchia would have been utterly miserable if she had listened to her parents and followed traditional social norms. It took a lot of courage—and, no doubt, some suffering—to carve out a new path that was all her own, but the result was a life she could look back on as both happy and justifiable in the light of reason. You are all setting out into a life you have chosen as a general matter, but the daily particularities of it will involve many aspects that you have not precisely chosen, conventional expectations that can all too easily lead one along and sap individuality and self-creation. So as you go on from day to day, remember how she proudly says, “Do you suppose that I have deliberated badly about my own life?” and try to live up to the voice in each of you that poses that same question.

2. Don’t be excessively influenced by money. Money is nice, but Hipparchia’s choice of relative poverty over material comfort had rich rewards. Her story reminds us that there is always some free food around, and being too concerned about the material future could chill the spirit of adventure and lead to narrow choices. Hipparchia did not, like so many people, ask about money first and way of life second.

Each person needs to figure out how his or her life can productively touch lives outside the privileged community to which most young lawyers belong.
3. When you encounter opposition, don’t be cowed, and don’t be ashamed of who you are. You have just finished three years of education in a law school that teaches you to value good arguments and to make them, even when power and authority are on the other side. So you have been trained to behave like Hipparchia: refute the powerful big shot, and don’t worry about what happens next. In life outside the Law School, however, differences of power are ubiquitous, and these differences can all too easily dampen the rational ardor of the young arguer. These days, a woman who makes an argument refuting a senior partner would probably not get her clothes ripped off, although similar things did happen with impunity not so long ago. But she—and her male counterpart—might well offend the powerful, and the fear of giving offense chills reason. Do not be chilled. This is very difficult, but be tough and persevere.

4. Think about the whole world, and somehow find a way to be a citizen of the world. Hipparchia and Crates left their hometown and traveled all over the Greek world because the philosophical movement of which they were a part invented the idea of global citizenship and always tried to remind people of their responsibilities to all humanity, meaning people of all classes and groups in their own nation and also people in other nations. (Out of this school grew our first doctrines of just and unjust war, as well as accounts of our duties to help people in other nations who are suffering from natural disasters, and so forth.) Crates wrote a poem that expressed this ideal eloquently: “My native land does not have just one tower or one roof. Its citadel is as wide as the whole world, and all of us can spend our lives there.”

The job of lawyer can be practiced in an insular way. But it offers countless opportunities to be a world citizen: international work with a firm, engagement in issues that have a global dimension, but, also, work in your own community that helps bridge gaps of class and opportunity—creative philanthropy. Each person needs to figure out how his or her life can productively touch lives outside the privileged community to which most young lawyers belong. But this is another issue that is quickly lost from view under pressure of time. So now, before you are overwhelmed, is the time to think hard about how your life can in some manner contribute to humanity as a whole.

5. Continue your education. Hipparchia’s whole life was one of curiosity and exploration. Having rejected the traditional woman’s life of weaving and sitting at home, she went out into the world determined to educate herself, and she continue to educate herself her whole life long, looking for good arguments, trying out her own, experimenting in new ways of living. In that same spirit, you can regard this day as not the end of your education but its beginning. That’s a hard one to remember when you are overworked, so that’s why it is so important to think about your continuing education now, and build into your life various ways to continue to explore.

How, you ask, could a busy ambitious young person possibly continue an education while determined to do good work in a very demanding job? Well, it might be by something as simple as listening to a series of audiobooks
during your workouts or your morning and evening commutes. It might be through a community project that you pursue outside work—or a pro bono project you pursue within work. It might be through an organization with which you get involved, and in connection with which you might eventually even find time to travel to places you've never visited. Or it might be in a determination to try out new intellectual approaches in your work: if you’ve so far had a passion for philosophy, learn some economics. If you’ve focused on our rich offerings in law and economics, learn more history and philosophy. There’s no end to the list of productive ways to continue your education. The only bad answer to the challenge is not to take it up at all. As Hipparchia said, “Do you think I deliberated badly about my own life, . . . when I devoted my time to education?”

6. Don't forget the spirit of love and joy. If there is anything that stands out in this remarkable life, it is a spirit of delight that animates it as a whole. Hipparchia is obviously having a great deal of fun, and she adores the life she has chosen. Moreover, the adversity and material hardship she faced did not rob her of her sense of humor: think of her high-spirited defiance of Theodorus, the famous big shot who, it turns out, can't even defend his own arguments except by physical violence. Delight and humor are the first casualties, often, of overwork and anxiety, two problems that are likely to beset the budding legal career. But joy makes everything you do—every argument, every new proposal—so much more powerful. To follow this piece of advice requires considerable self-knowledge, since every prescription for joy is highly individual. So think of the ways that you can keep spaces in your life for joy, and be determined that this spirit will animate your work as a whole.

On this happy day, go into the future in that spirit of adventure and delight, never stop learning, and you too will be able to say to all challengers, “Do you think I have deliberated badly about my own life?”