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James Comey
Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation

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COMMENCEMENT REMARKS OF FBI DIRECTOR
JAMES COMEY TO UNIVERSITY OF RICHMOND
SCHOOL OF LAW CLASS OF 2016

James Comey *

It is an honor and a thrill to be back here in a community I love at a school that made such a difference in my life and that still feels like home to me.

I want to offer just very briefly one reflection from my career in government, then a piece of advice about public service.

When I think about the successful people I have known, whether they were lawyers, or physicians, or business leaders, or government leaders, there was an overwhelmingly common attribute, which is judgment. Judgment is different than intelligence. Intelligence is actually fairly common, judgment is very rare. Intelligence is the ability to solve a riddle, to master an equation, to nail a set of facts. Lots of people can do that. Judgment is the ability to circle, to orbit that answer, and see it as it might be seen through the eyes of others; to move the answer in place and time; to try and see how it might be seen a year from now in Congress, five years from now in a newspaper editorial office. How might other people experience this? Judgment is the ability to say what something means. When you are graphing something, very intelligent people can master a data set and show you the answer on a graph. People of great judgment can look at that and say, "That's what it says. Let me tell you what it means."

So where does this come from, this ability to orbit a situation and see it through the eyes of others and move it in place and time? I think it comes mostly from the way you were raised. It comes from screwing up, from doing things that tick people off and then remembering that, "Aha, that's how people see that,

* James Comey is the Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. This is the text of a speech he recently gave at the University of Richmond School of Law Commencement Ceremony on May 7, 2016.

that's how they experience it." It is mostly a gift to you, and it is nurtured along the way, that gift is protected and nurtured.

Now, think about what you have just done for the past three years—and I know it is early and maybe a little raw right now—but think about what you have practiced doing for three years. You have practiced, with the help of these great people, taking a situation and moving it in your mind, asking yourself and being asked, in a very demanding way, "So how would that be different in this place or that place? How would it be different if we changed the facts? How would it be different if we changed some of the assumptions? And by the way, what are your assumptions? How sure are you of what you just said? And how would that change if I changed this little thing?"

Believe it or not, you were being drilled in the practice of judgment, to take an answer, to take a situation and see it from different perspectives, move it around and experience it through the eyes of another. That is an extraordinarily valuable gift to you. It requires, as your student speaker said, a measure of humility, because it is very, very difficult to escape the trap that is each of us: I can only experience the world through the experience of an awkward, six-foot eight-inch white person from the New York metropolitan area. Almost nobody else experienced the world the same way I do, and so how do I get in their heads and see it the way they see it, so I can be a better leader, a better lawyer, a better husband, a better person? Judgment is the answer: being intentional about fostering my ability to ask myself, "How could it be seen differently?"

So you have just spent three years practicing that. That is necessary but not sufficient. It will not shock you to know there are those people who have gotten out of law school and not demonstrated great judgment in the rest of their lives. You have to stay after it. How do you do that?

I have two slightly weird pieces of advice. The first is, sleep. Sleep. Sleep is not a moral failing. I always knew it was really important, now I have got all kinds of science to support me. What is going on while you sleep? Your brain is engaging in a neuro-chemical ballet to map the data that you took in during the day, and make connections. It is laying down judgment in your head while you sleep.

My second slightly weird piece of advice is, you have got to keep a life. One of the things that nurtures and protects judgment is physical distance from whatever is dominating your life. In most of your cases, that will be work. You have got to step away from the work, and I do not know whether it is kickboxing or stamp collecting or dancing. You must keep doing that. Because that physical distance from the work fosters and protects your ability to orbit a situation and see it through different perspectives. Get away from this work.

And as you do that, you have got to love somebody. This hall, and I hope this world, is full of people called loved ones, because you are supposed to love them. There is a danger, especially in the life of a lawyer, and it is called “get-back-itis.” It is the idea that, “I have got to do this important thing, I have got this really important matter to handle. I will get back to ‘fill in the blank.’” My mother, my father, my girlfriend, my boyfriend, my siblings, my friends, it does not matter. I will get back to that while I do this.

One of the challenges of my job is I see a lot of bad things every day. There is no getting back. You will turn, and they will not be there. I have five children. I have experienced an extraordinary array of loved ones because they change each year as they get older—my wife does not change at all, by the way. They change each year as they get older. There is no experience in the world like feeling the pounding and hearing the pounding of a two-year-old’s footsteps as you come in the door at the end of the day. Be there for that. There is no getting back to that. It requires a fight, an actual fight, to maintain that sort of health in your life, because the get-back-itis will be overwhelming to you. Fight for that balance in your life. It is the right thing to do, but it will protect your judgment.

So I want you to nurture judgment by sleeping and loving somebody—and sometimes those go together in appropriate circumstances, and that is fine. I believe the FBI director just said something like that, so I am going to move on.

Judgment is the attribute of successful people in this world. Do not let them tell you it is IQ. IQ is kind of a cover charge. Judgment is what makes the difference. That is my piece of advice from my career.

Now let me make a pitch for public service. I have left government service twice, and both times it left a hole in my heart. It

took me a while the first time to figure out what was going on. And it happened when we moved from New York to Richmond in 1993, and I was a federal prosecutor in New York, and I wanted to be a federal prosecutor in Richmond. But there was a hiring freeze which got in the way of that transition within the government. And so I went to a big law firm, a great law firm, great people. And they gave me matching furniture, which I had not had in my government career yet—I actually had drapes that matched the furniture. I had a parking space, they paid me well. I had interesting issues, colleagues I really liked. But something was missing. And it was my amazing wife, Patrice, who noticed it first. She said one day, “What’s wrong with you?” something she says in lots of different contexts. But she said, “What’s wrong with you? We have a five-bedroom Colonial we paid \$252,000 for. We live in this amazing community of Richmond, Virginia. The kids love it here. What is wrong with you?” I said, “You know what it is? I think I miss getting up in the morning and being part of trying to do something good every day. I actually miss work with moral content, as obnoxious as that sounds, I really miss it.”

And so three years later—because thank goodness one of your great professors left government service to come to a different kind of service—I took John Douglass’ job at the U.S. attorney’s office, and I was not as smart, I was not as good looking, I was not as funny, but I had the job. And so I was back in public service, and I was a very happy person. Once you have done that kind of work—service work, it does not have to be in the government, but doing something that is not about you and it is not about money—it is addictive, and when you leave it, it leaves a hole in your heart.

The challenge of being successful lawyers is, often times, the things that are siren songs of prestige and money draw you in a different direction. I know it can be hard to do public service work. It is hard on your credit cards, it can be very hard to do for an entire career. But I actually ache for my law school classmates from thirty years ago who have never even tried. Because here is what I worry. Professor Bacigal quoted Albert Einstein, I will quote him again. Einstein urged young people, “Try not to be people of success. Try to be people of value.” If you have never taken the time to try and be part of doing something of moral content as part of your work, you will have missed something. Augustin said, “Human honor is but smoke which has no weight.” There is

a danger, as you get to the end of a life and realize you have accumulated the smoke of success but nothing of real value.

So here is my most depressing piece of advice for you, and I will close with this uplifting message. Occasionally you need to do something weird, and close your eyes and imagine yourself at the end of your life—I told you this would not be an uplifting moment. I hope you are old and gray at that point—I so hope I am old and gray at that point. But close your eyes, be old and gray, and look back, and ask this question from that vantage point: Who do I want to have been? Because if you ask it that way, the smoke is cleared, the things that get in the way when you only live life forward—houses, cars, money, human honor, the next “big thing”—all that stuff is stripped away. At the end of your life, who cares about that stuff? What will matter in a real sense will come into view. Everybody’s answer will be different in a different way. My answer is I want to have been somebody who was a great husband and father and friend. I want to know my children, their children, and God-willing, their children. And I want to have been somebody who, with whatever ability I had, I took some time to do something for people who needed me.

I hope you will work hard to take the amazing education you have gotten here, where you have been taught judgment, where you have been exposed to the world, to important issues, to the challenges so many people in our communities and our country face; I hope you will take the time to answer that question now, and let it guide the way you live your life. Be people of value. I hope at the end of this life, you are people who look back and say, “I did something I loved. I was part of something that meant a great deal to me.” And I hope you remember that this education began what I hope will be a remarkable and fulfilling journey. You are very, very lucky. Congratulations!
