

## **“SEARCHING FOR ANSWERS”**

### **Peking University School of Transnational Law Class of 2015 Commencement**

**Jeffrey S. Lehman**

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President Hai. Dean McConnaughay. Dear Faculty Colleagues. Distinguished guests.

Members of the Peking University School of Transnational Law Class of 2015, it has been almost four years since I first met you, during the week of August 23, 2011.

That was a pretty intense week, a week when I had the chance to talk with you about the experience that lay ahead of you. On that Monday, I spoke to you about how STL would help you develop the qualities of a transnational lawyer, including the ability to understand a problem both from your own perspective and from the perspective of someone else. On that Tuesday, we discussed an example of why those qualities matter, the classical play *Antigone*, in which horrible tragedy followed because Creon and Antigone each failed to understand how their situation appeared from the perspective of the other. And finally, on that Friday, I spoke to you and all the other new students at the Shenzhen Graduate School about how you would find this campus to be like Hogwarts, offering all of you Harry Potters and Hermione Grangers a magical opportunity to discover your own voice, to move beyond prejudice, and to develop your self confidence.

Your four years as STL students have raced by faster than any of us could have imagined possible, and suddenly, today, none of that experience is ahead of you any more. What was an exciting and somewhat scary future is now the sweet and comfortable past.

Today you are all transnational lawyers. You have learned to cherish complexity, subtlety, and difficulty. You have become comfortable with uncertainty, and with the idea of living in a world where questions do not always have one right answer. Like generations of law school graduates before you, you have come to know that wisdom lies in the ability to simultaneously hold two inconsistent perspectives on an issue in your mind, and to understand how each of those inconsistent perspectives might be held by good and decent people.

Sadly for me, I was not able to spend time with you during the last three of those four years as you perfected those skills. And so I am especially grateful to have the chance to be here today, to talk with you once again about the future, about the new experiences that lie ahead of you, as you step from the world of study into the world of action.

The past four years have been hard work. But in one important way the past four years were much, much easier than the next forty years are going to be.

During the past four years your mission was clear. Your job was to educate yourself. Your job was to use the resources that Beida put in front of you, and to develop yourselves as best you could.

The greatest challenge of the next forty years is that the mission is no longer clear. Your education is complete. So what are you supposed to do now?

Are you supposed to get a job? Are you supposed to get married? Are you supposed to have a baby?

Are you supposed to try to become rich? Are you supposed to try to become powerful? Are you supposed to try to become famous?

Are you supposed to make yourself happy? Are you supposed to make certain that you don't cause others pain? Are you supposed to devote yourself to bringing other people as much joy as possible?

Are you supposed to make your parents proud of you? Are you supposed to make your former teachers proud of you? Are you supposed to make your true love proud of you?

Many people will offer you answers to these questions. But ultimately nobody has the ability to give you the answers. And in my comments this afternoon, I am not going to give you the answers either. The point is, each of you is going to have to choose for yourself the answers that you find most satisfying.

I hope you will treat the next forty years as a voyage in search of the answers to those questions. And as you go forward on that voyage, I hope that you will keep three points in mind.

First, please try to come up with answers that feel good to you. You are a unique individual. You are living your life, not anyone else's. And you are only going to experience life once. So please do the work of thinking about these questions; please don't be content to ride along on your own inertia or the movements you feel around you.

Second, feel free to change your answers as you voyage onward. Life is not a single story. It comes in a series of chapters, and as you find yourself finishing one chapter, use the moment as an opportunity to change your answers. Changing your answers doesn't mean you had the wrong answers before; it only means that you are continuing to reflect as you age.

And third, please consider the possibility that the struggle for answers is really what makes life worth living after all. In that struggle, you may find it useful to keep reading what other people have written about the struggle.

This year, I have enjoyed reading a new book called *Mass Flourishing*, by the economist Edmund Phelps. You can read it in English, or in Chinese translation if you prefer.

The book is mostly about what kind of society Professor Phelps believes will be most successful in the twenty-first century. But in order to answer that problem, Professor Phelps has to spend a whole chapter discussing what he thinks makes life good.

For Phelps, a good life is "vital." It is about adventure, facing challenges, solving fresh problems, having new experiences, searching, exploring, inventing, creating, becoming someone new.

I am not saying you should agree with Phelps or people like him. What I am saying is that I believe your life will feel more meaningful if you continue to read writers like Phelps and struggle with their ideas as you continue to do the work of deciding what will inspire you to live life in the way that you choose to live it.

Members of the Class of 2015, you are about to embark on lives of service to a society that desperately needs you. As you go, let me conclude by stating a few hopes that all your STL teachers hold for you:

- May you enjoy the special pleasures of craft — the private satisfaction of doing a task as well as it can be done.
- May you enjoy the special pleasures of profession — the added satisfaction of knowing that your efforts promote a larger public good.
- May you be blessed with good luck, and also with the wisdom to appreciate when you have been lucky rather than skillful.
- May you find ways to help others under circumstances where they cannot possibly know that you have done so.
- May you be patient, and gentle, and tolerant, without becoming smug, self-satisfied, and arrogant.
- May you know enough bad weather that you never take the sunshine of Shenzhen for granted, and enough good weather that your faith in the coming of spring is never shaken.
- May you always be able to admit ignorance, doubt, vulnerability, and uncertainty.
- May you frequently travel beyond the places that are comfortable and familiar, the better to appreciate the miraculous diversity of life.

And may your steps lead you often back to Shenzhen. Back to the Peking University of School of Transnational Law. Class of 2015, the STL story is very much your story. And we will always be happy to welcome you home.