

Speech by Ms Lilian Chiang
Member of the Council of City University of Hong Kong

Distinguished guests, professors, ladies and gentlemen,

It is a pleasure and great honour to be invited today to deliver the High Table Address.

I am glad to see so many capable young men and women who have chosen to read law, some of whom have completed the first year of study, and LLB graduates who will soon join the legal profession.

First, a few words about the legal profession. The legal profession is a serious profession which comes with a significant amount of lifelong responsibilities, involving many long hours in the office or chamber (including weekends) and a commitment to ongoing education and self-learning. However, it offers an extremely rewarding career and the ability to play a role in shaping Hong Kong's future as one of the world's leading financial centres as well as a special economic region of China.

So, what makes a successful lawyer, I hear you ask. In my view, first and foremost it is necessary to possess the legal technical excellence. However, that alone is not enough. You need the ability to distil complex sets of facts and provide legal advice in plain English or Chinese. It means to apply the law to solve the problem, resolve the conflict and find a solution for your client in a commercially minded and practical manner. Also, you must be willing to continue to evolve and adapt to the ever-changing environment throughout your career.

This evening, I will share my views on a much used but misunderstood term: **"The benefit of hindsight"**.

"Hindsight" means the understanding of a situation or event only after it has happened. I'm sure all of you, myself included, have wished at times we had acted differently with "the benefit of hindsight".

I will share with you the benefit of hindsight, some of my experiences which I share with my daughter who is not a lawyer, in the hope that you may gain some foresight as to what life's journey may entail, and how you may choose to travel.

Firstly, Communication:

The mode of communication with others has dramatically changed since I first entered the legal profession.

Today, the mode of communication is almost instantaneous: email, WhatsApp, WeChat, to name but a few. Clients assume you have started to address their problems as soon as they have pressed the send button. Time is of the essence. Clients expect a response sometimes within the hour, and in any event within the day regardless of whether you are in the office or on holiday.

Thankfully, Deacons' IT department has not yet come up with a means to enable clients to communicate telepathically! Joking aside, it is only a matter of time, but I suspect it will be during your time, not mine!

So, what's the most important part of communication and the skills that you need to master? None of what I have just described. Despite all the technological advancement, in my view, the most important communication tool has not changed over the years. It remains your ears. So, train yourself to listen to what others are really saying. However, only 7% of human communication is words. Sometimes you may also need to use your eyes as you watch how someone is talking, so you may observe their physical reaction in gauging how to respond. The bad news for today's younger generation is that you cannot communicate effectively whilst at the same time texting someone else or watching your favourite YouTuber.

If you really want to become a skilled communicator, you must relearn the basic instincts you possess. When I say that if you really listen to your clients, you will be laying the foundations from where longstanding and trusted relationships may grow.

This leads me to my next topic, with the benefit of hindsight, the importance of

Relationships:

The importance of personal and professional relationships cannot be overstated. You must choose and nurture them carefully.

There is only one relationship that is predetermined for you and which I would encourage you to cherish and that is the relationship with your family.

Whilst you cannot choose your parents, equally they cannot decide for you the sort of person you may become. It is an evolving relationship, which requires some give and take on both sides. Like all close relationships, there will be good as well as bad times, but do appreciate that your parents have supported you along the way so that you are now sitting here this evening. Thank them from time to time and seek out their wise counsel for they will have your best interest at heart and have more life experience than you, although they may not have mastered Instagram or Snapchat!

The ability to grow and maintain professional relationships is a key life skill that you must acquire and constantly enhance in order to be successful. You must recognise that human connections take time to build and are the most important investments in life. The willingness to go the extra mile even at your own inconvenience is part of the process.

As you build relationships, be mindful of the importance of diversity. Do not seek out those who appear to share the same views as you or with whom you are constantly in agreement. Seek out those from different backgrounds, different disciplines and those who may seek to challenge you and who may be critical of you. The world is not enriched by its uniformity but by its diversity.

Next, with the benefit of hindsight more often than not, it's:

Mind and not just a healthy body

It never ceases to amaze me these days the amount of time and money many people spend on fitness products and gym memberships, striving for perfect fitness. It is of course important to keep in good physical shape, but few people consider the importance of investing in mental well-being until they become overwhelmed, overly stressed and develop anxiety or depression. I have personally witnessed the brightest and the smartest having to leave the profession, losing their careers and even their lives due to their poor mental state, some of whom are my good friends.

We live in an ever-pressurised environment subjected to an endless stream of information and news (unfortunately much of it being the bad kind).

We are increasingly inclined to dwell over the past or worry about the future, neither of which we have much control over. Few of us realise the importance of simply focusing on the present, over which we have some element of control through the personal choices we make and how we choose to react to the circumstances around us. Have you ever wondered why it is called the "Present"? It's one of the greatest presents if you are able to live in it.

An increasing amount of medical research points to the benefit of meditation or practice of mindfulness in achieving overall mental well-being. I am not a patient person by nature, but over the last few years I have tried to practise mindfulness and would certainly recommend that you consider its possible benefits before dismissing it (as I used to do in the past).

So, remember you must make time to invest in your own well-being. For your mind is your greatest asset and you should do all you can to preserve it.

Next, I want to say a few words about adversity and failure and how ultimately this may determine whether you are able to achieve your ultimate goals:

Adversity & Failure

Failure is one of the things we fear most throughout our lives. We tend to avoid talking about it and are ill prepared to deal with it.

We only hear stories of successful people of how they have achieved such status. Rarely are we privy to the numerous failures they experienced on their journey and their ability to face up to adversity and so became stronger.

With the benefit of hindsight, failure is more a state of mind rather than anything else. Whether you see the message in adversity to benefit from it will determine whether you can achieve greater things.

When I was a law student at HKU many years ago, I taught contract law in Hong Kong Polytechnic in the evening to pay my tuition fee. Therefore, I missed a lot of fun to participate in many social activities at the University hall. However, when I started to practise, I noted that my knowledge of contract law provided me with a very solid foundation. I am sure the professors will agree with me that one has to be very thorough in a subject before one can teach it. My teaching experience appeared to be an adversity when I was younger, but it turns out to be a beneficial experience in later years.

So, whilst I wish you all the very best of success, I also wish you just the right amount of failure and adversity so that you may grow stronger in the long run and accept failure and adversity as an inevitable part of attaining higher goals.

I would like to quote the Chief Justice of the US Supreme Court, John Roberts, when he delivered the commencement address at his son's graduation:

"From time to time in the years to come, I hope you will be treated unfairly, so that you will come to know the value of justice. I hope that you will suffer betrayal because that will teach you the importance of loyalty. I hope you will be lonely from time to time so that you don't take friends for granted. I wish you bad luck, again, from time to time so that you will be conscious of the role of chance in life and understand that your success is not completely deserved, and that the failure of others is not completely deserved either."

To conclude, a few words about **Courage**:

Never be afraid to change, to challenge yourself, learn from experience to make improvements and even reinvent yourself. I am a very shy person by nature. I remember my first Deacons annual dinner when I was a trainee. I prayed that my name wouldn't be called so that I need not go on stage to receive a prize from the Lucky Draw. But I am unusually fortunate in Lucky Draws!

At that time, I never imagined that I would have to do so much public speaking, including this High Table Address.

As you reflect on this evening's High Table Address and spend time with your distinguished professional mentors over the course of the next weeks, months or year:

Have the courage to ask for help when you need it and to extend help when it is asked of you;

Have the courage to do the right thing even though you may be in the minority;

Have the courage to embrace change as it is the only constant in life;

Have the courage to apologise when you are wrong or have wronged another;

And, have the courage to be yourself.

Finally, I would ask you to note that there are many in the world who are equally capable as you are but do not have your opportunities, i.e. the privilege of receiving an education at a top law school.

I therefore do ask that you use this opportunity to equip yourself with legal knowledge diligently, and in future to pursue not only fame and money but the worthy cause to uphold the rule of law and justice and to make a difference and a better society.

The practice of law is not only a business. It is not only about making money or winning a case. It is an honourable profession. With the increase in the number of practitioners, the competition for work has intensified. Faced with commercial pressures, it is important to ensure that ethical standards and integrity are maintained.

Always remember that what you do and how you handle a case may impact others, sometimes profoundly.

I wish you happiness and success in the years ahead.

Thank you very much.

The speech was delivered by Ms Chiang at the Sir TL Yang Society High Table Dinner on 17 May 2019.