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Professor Amy Coney Barrett, Diploma Ceremony Address

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Thank you, Class of 2016, for this honor. I have had the privilege of teaching the majority of you, and I am simultaneously proud to watch you graduate and sad to see you go. Your time at Notre Dame has truly flown by, and we will miss you.

The words I want to share with you today are borrowed from Teddy Roosevelt: *Comparison is the thief of joy.* I stumbled across this quote a few years ago, and it struck such a chord that I had it framed and displayed in our home. It reminds the members of our family to guard against comparing ourselves to others. That is my advice to you.

Class of 2016, so much life lies before you. There will be many, many good things, as well as some unexpected challenges. Throughout all of it, your joys will be so much sweeter and your burdens so much lighter if you embrace them as your own, without comparing your lot in life to anyone else's.

I can attest from experience that this requires self-discipline. Human nature being what it is, we all experience the impulse to judge our own merits and circumstances by comparing them to others. I fear that this temptation may be particularly pronounced for lawyers, because having self-selected into an adversarial profession, we tend to be a competitive lot. Resist the temptation and you will be happier for it. The destination of comparison is dissatisfaction, because the grass is always greener somewhere.

Fast-forward a few years. You love your job, and you're doing well. You've gotten good evaluations, and you've been given your first oral argument. Then, you find out that a classmate has been written up as a "rising star to watch" in your state's bar magazine. You have a choice. You can push aside comparison, be happy for your friend, and move on. Or, you can view your job through the lens of your friend's success, and let your contentment vanish. *Comparison is the thief of joy.*

Comparison is even more destructive when you weigh your disappointments against someone else's happiness. There is no surer way to permit a cross to crush you: just as comparison deflates your happiness, it magnifies your sorrow. The pain of losing a loved one is amplified, not lessened, by the time you spend resenting those who have not experienced such loss.

But it doesn't have to be that way. I have a dear friend who has never been able to have children, and this has been a great sorrow for her. Yet when a pregnancy is announced, she is the first to offer congratulations; when a baby is born, she is the first visitor at the hospital. I expressed admiration for this, which I assumed was a natural outgrowth of her generous character. Her response surprised me. She said, "You do understand I've had to work hard at this. When a baby is born, my emotions slide toward self-pity. But I can choose to feel sorry for myself or I can choose to share in my friend's happiness. It takes self-discipline, but I choose happiness."

Class of 2016, choose happiness. Counterpunch the temptation to envy by choosing to be the first to rejoice in the good of others. This will not always come naturally; sometimes, it will require self-discipline. Refuse to let comparison steal your joy.

The trick of comparison is that it rarely shows you reality. We think it does: after all, it is better to get an award than not, and your friend's house may in fact be much nicer than yours. But when we compare ourselves to someone else, we zero in on the one thing we envy; we don't look at—and in fact can't even see—the whole picture. We forget about the many good things that are uniquely ours, and there is no way we can know about the spots where the other person suffers. Comparison is like looking in a funhouse mirror: it distorts the picture.

Each of us is a unique, unrepeatable combination of strengths and weaknesses, joys and sorrows. I'm going to describe comparison the way that Justice Scalia described balancing tests in constitutional law: measuring the quality of your life against someone else's is "like judging whether a particular line is longer than a particular rock is heavy." It can't be done. We're all apples to oranges.

I'll conclude with the image of a runner. I ran in my first track meet when I was 10, and I had a rather disappointing finish. My uncle met me on the field afterward and said "Honey, do you know how many times you looked to see where the other runners were? Every time you look to the right or the left, you lose a half step. Next time, look straight ahead and run your best."

Class of 2016, look straight ahead and run your best. Don't lose time or happiness by comparing yourself to those on your right or your left. And as you run forward, carry the torch of faith with you.

The ancient Greeks were fond of torch races, where the object was not simply to finish, but to finish with your torch still lit. Even the fastest runner was disqualified if his torch went out before he crossed the finish line.

As you leave Notre Dame, guard the torch of your faith. Hold it in front and let it guide your way. Rejoice in your blessings and bear your sorrows with your eyes fixed on that light. Run fast, but keep your torch lit so that you are not running for nothing.

Class of 2016, great things lie ahead. Fight the good fight; finish the race; keep the faith.

Law School Diploma Ceremony, May 14, 2016
Amy Barrett