Opening Academic Year Speech

There I lay. On my back. My saxophone on the floor by my side. I may be clumsy at times, but what happened that fateful afternoon wasn’t my fault. Having bought some paints from Action, I stumbled over a plastic sleeve lying behind the cash counter, though still within the shop. My first thought was for my saxophone: was it damaged? And if it was, would I be able to get the store to pay for it? At the cash counter I was told, after the manager had been called in, that store policy was that they bore no responsibility for any damage suffered by customers beyond the cash counter. But was this something a store could simply decide for itself? After all, my fall had happened on their premises! I could already see myself, in my mind’s eye, making a passionate plea for customer safety, and all the way home my mind swirled with questions about the incident’s legal consequences. Questions that only confirmed my suspicion that a study programme in Law was the perfect choice for me. A study programme I was due to start in less than three months. My curiosity had been aroused. Of all human traits, curiosity may well be the most important. Our will to always keep on searching and finding answers, bringing humanity further, step by step. Curiosity is the power that has brought our world to its current level of knowledge. Anyone can see that apples fall from the tree, but it took a Newton to wonder why they fell.

By the time I was 9 I already knew I wanted to become a lawyer: my curiosity had been awakened: I was the world’s biggest fan of Legally Blonde. This led to me one morning, aged 9 and holding my father’s hand, to the doors of Roermond’s large and imposing court house to attend one of their Open Days. I see that many of you today are wearing a toga. Well, on that day, I too was allowed for the first time to wear one, with much too long sleeves. My awe of the unknown building slowly changed to curiosity. I wondered about present and future legal suits: what were they about? In the following years, I wondered what legal questions hadn’t been asked yet, and which ones would be asked still. I also wondered whether I would one day be allowed to play an active role in this process. I believe curiosity was the engine behind my success in achieving this goal.

To me, the courthouse is a place that triggers curiosity. A place where innocence and guilt are settled, where legal questions are asked, and where human drama unfolds. A place where any legal battle can be fought. I don’t see it as simply a building, but a place to which people have gone in search of justice since the days of Ancient Rome. A place where the judge weighs arguments on two golden saucers. Where Lady Justice remains blind to background, status and gender. Where advocates challenge each other with the world’s strongest sword: the Law. A place where my curiosity continues to grow.

Nine years later I found myself in another building, one that fed my curiosity even further: the Grotius. The same kind of curiosity that once drove this building’s namesake, Hugo de Groot, to write down the foundations of modern international law. His books brought humanity insights about war, peace and natural law. There I stood, by the wide windows on the ground-floor of the glass building, and gazed with interest at the world outside. I saw our university’s other buildings. Buildings where day after day knowledge is collected and acquired. I saw the debris of Thomas van Aquino, where once upon a time, curiosity bred great managers, psychologists and sociologists. Even though Thomas van Aquino saw God as the world’s primary driver, he himself still became a driver of our knowledge. Now a new building will arise from these ruins. It will be called Montessori, after Maria Montessori, who revealed children’s intrinsic curiosity and developed a pedagogical method around it. Let us all learn from her. So that curiosity may become the engine behind the development of knowledge. So
that our goal is not simply to recite lines learnt by heart, but to make room for disruptive questions. Looking slightly further ahead, I could glimpse over the treetops the roof of the Elinor Ostrom building. Ostrom’s curiosity led her to become the first woman to win a Nobel Prize. How many women study here today, who burn with the same ambition? From Ostrom I glanced to the left, towards the Huygens building, that huge greenhouse and breeding place where students make new discoveries every day. Their curiosity led to the discovery of new physics formulas, Saturn’s rings and the pendulum clock.

I see these buildings as rooms in a house of curiosity that has been standing for the past ninety-five years and that has meant so much to so many. A house where students are encouraged to grow, new discoveries are made and knowledge is cultivated. A house that in over the past ninety-five years produced 4 Prime Ministers, 2 Nobel Prize Winners and many research grants. A house that is still in the process of being built. So many graduates have left the house by now, who continue today to flourish thanks to the curiosity awakened here. But are you still really curious every day? You probably don’t think every day about where your curiosity comes from. And you don’t have to, of course you don’t! But I think it would be wonderful if we took the time, in our 95th year here, to have a better look. A better look at the roof tiles that have housed us for many years, a look at the bricks, a look at the windows. And remember how it all began. Let us think back to where our curiosity was born. Which is why I’d like to take a moment to remember myself, two years ago, on a floor, in a store. With a questionable liability question.

That fateful afternoon when a legal question was first born in my mind. Nothing was damaged that day, so there was no need for me to investigate further. But as I thought back to this day in preparation for today’s speech, I got curious about the answer. And what did I discover? Unfortunately, I’m not the only clumsy person around. There are many cases of customers falling in stores. For example, in 2015, a woman suffered an injury after she slipped on a piece of cardboard in a Kruidvat store. In 2014, a man fell over a wet doormat at the entrance of an Albert Heijn. In 2010, a woman stumbled over a pallet behind the counter of the Jumbo. And there are many more such cases. The circumstances of the fall, the likelihood that customers did not see the danger, the odds of an accident and the severity of the consequences all play a role in assessing potential liability cases.

In all these cases, the store was held responsible, because odds are high that a customer will focus on something else than the floor. By the way, I did call the Action. And they told me that they are held responsible even if the customer falls behind the cash counter, so the story I was told two years ago was complete nonsense. But how would such a case be resolved? I cannot give you a final answer to this question, since court rulings are the prerogative of judges. But I hope to have awakened your curiosity with my story. Now you too might wonder, and ask yourself questions. And I’m in turn curious about your stories and your questions, as you are probably also curious about those of the other people gathered here today. After all, everyone you meet knows something you don’t yet know. What are your stories? How did you end up here? Tell me about it! Let’s tell it to each other! Do you actually know who the person next to you is?

So I’d like to ask you to look at your own building, but also to step beyond its walls. Beyond the boundaries of your discipline. And crazy though this may sound to law students, who tend to need a bit of a persuasion to step outside the Grotius, just try it, it’s not as hard as it looks.

And so, ladies and gentlemen,
from the Grotius,
from the Erasmus,
from the Elinor Ostrom,
from the Huygens,
from the hospital,
Go in search of fresh insights, starting today, starting right now!