Thank you, Dean Schwab, for your wonderful invitation to be the after-dinner speaker at Cornell Law School's mid-winter Advisory Council meeting.

Thank you too for giving me carte blanche on a choice of subject of this evening's remarks. For a whole host of reasons, the subject that has bubbled up in my mind every time I have thought of standing before you this evening is not the economy, or the world situation, (heaven help us) or the courts, or even one of my favorite subjects--the Rule Against Perpetuities--but the subject of junctures, life junctures, the fortuity of them and the opportunity they offer. I guess that's no surprise, considering my own brand new status as Judith S. Kaye, Esq., New York State's first female former Chief Judge, after more than a quarter – century on the State's high court, 15 of those years as Chief Judge. Talk about a juncture!

I think of this as a brand new chapter in my professional life--Chapter 3. Chapter 1 was roughly 21 years in the world of New York City law firms, starting back in 1962, when women in big firms still were something of a phenomenon. Chapter 2, of course, was 25 years, three months, 19 days and 12 hours in the extraordinary role of judge of New York State's high court, a remarkable 15 of those years as Chief Judge. I am very fortunate to have begun Chapter 3 at a great law firm, Skadden Arps, and especially welcome that several of my new colleagues are here this evening.

Though Chapter 3 begins back in the world of big New York law firms, that world has changed radically--need I tell this audience?--starting with the fact that the big New York law firm today is literally a worldwide venture, hyperconnected 24/7. So life junctures are very, very high on my list of concerns these days.
But truth be told, it was not my own personal status that got me started down this road. What started me down the road of life junctures, on my way to the Metropolitan Opera House last week, was actually thinking about my late husband, Stephen Rackow Kaye (Cornell '52, Cornell Law '56) and his lifelong passion for opera. Throughout our marriage we attended dozens of opera performances a year, traveled the world for opera, and drove our kids nuts with opera recordings in the car.

For Stephen, it all began in his first years at Cornell, when his roommate just happened to be a great opera fan—Jules Janeck, an agriculture major, student of the spinach plant and the tundra, today a renowned horticulturist and geneticist, a professor at Purdue University. His passion for opera was contagious—it infected Stephen. I'm told that opera played constantly in their dorm room. You never know. You just never know.

And for each of us, how many life-altering coincidences are there in our own experience, one event, one choice, one chance encounter that takes us down an entirely different path from carefully laid plans and expectations. That's even more true these unbelievable days, when everyone's plans and expectations meet new challenges at every turn.

For me, long past college I nurtured a burning ambition to be a journalist, making and shaping public opinion in capitals throughout the world. Had it not been for a dozen different happenstances along the way--that I now see only in retrospect--I could have succeeded in my burning ambition, and years ago been fired from my collapsing newspaper instead of being mandatorily retired from the New York State bench.

Two examples come readily to mind from my extraordinary Chief Judge life. The first is how vital it was always to seek out and be open to ideas that came from others. In the court
Among the successes I most take pride in are the many different initiatives that flowed from their perceptions about just turning the prism a bit—you know, not simply taking in cases and grinding out dispositions but thinking hard about what it is we are doing, thinking about the people before us, and asking how we might do better for litigants, for the court system and for society. As Judge Wesley would tell you, that's exactly how we come face-to-face with one another, the day I dropped in on him conducting felony screening in Rochester—not just getting through the huge array of felony cases before him but also figuring out how to screen the dockets to achieve a better result all around.

Same for our "problem-solving" courts like the drug courts and community courts, efforts to stop the downward spiral principally of drug–addicted low-level offenders back in our courts over and over again with foot-long rap sheets—not good for the courts, not good for the offenders, not good for the communities or society at large.

Indeed, it's hard for me to think of any wonderful court reform that did not begin with my four favorite words from a colleague: "I have an idea." Encouraging, listening to, building on the ideas of others, for me, has been life-transformative.

My second example of a critical juncture came close to 20 years ago, when then-Chief Judge Sol Wachtler asked me to chair his brand new Judicial Commission on Justice for Children. My answer was quick and simple: You must be joking. I thought that pretty clearly meant "no". As a former commercial litigator unfamiliar with the problems —— even the jargon——of Family Court matters, my decision was not difficult. But the Chief Judge was persistent and ultimately I caved.
Definitely one of the great decisions of my life, as I continue close to two decades later to chair that interdisciplinary group, and improving the lives of children in need became a centerpiece of my judge and now lawyer life. Today, anagrams like EPSDT and APHSA reel off my tongue, and I actually know what the McKinney-Vento and dually-adjudicated youth initiatives are all about. Not that I like speaking in this foreign lingo--we'd do better, we'd reach more people, if we all spoke plain English and were clear about what we meant.

Indeed, I cannot imagine more pressing issues for all of us than the concerns of our next generation--it's their future, but ours too. In fact, our nation's too. And there's so much each of us can do--as human beings, as law-trained human beings--to give our nation's kids a chance to develop their potential, instead of tolerating years and years of foster care limbo, or watching them drift toward an early criminal conviction or unintended pregnancy, with life-determinative consequences. Every single one of us can have a role in helping to turn their lives around. That's a discovery I made the day I capitulated and agreed to chair a commission on a subject I knew nothing about. What an opportunity!

My message about life junctures is really in the end a message to myself, whether as Chief Judge or a brand-new lawyer in a brand new law firm world.

Not long ago I had the pleasure of speaking on the telephone with a lawyer who became a major corporate executive in the field of automated legal research--he actually pioneered it. Now he devotes his life to simply giving away his money and traveling around the world--you know, like most of us here today. We had a pleasant back-and-forth about his own life junctures, from legal editor in Iowa all the way up to the owner of West Publishing. It was fascinating, and really amazing that he stayed on the telephone line with me. But my last question was the one
that gave him the most pleasure answering: what, I asked, was the key fact in his life that most accounted for his success?

And his answer came back immediately: attitude. A positive attitude, in his view, was what took him all the way up through the ranks. A positive attitude and persistence in what seemed to him the right course to take. Easier said than done--especially these days. But as we know in our heart of hearts, the only things that definitely beyond our reach are the things we ourselves put there.

And that pretty much sums up my thinking at this critical juncture in my own life, looking back and looking ahead. In so many ways these are such downcasting, dispiriting days, every day a bit dimmer, with no bottom in sight. But it seems to me that the life experience of my lawyer-friend is especially pertinent today--to stay positive and persistent; to find opportunities for new beginnings: to see hope instead of despair. It's a very empowering attitude, one I highly recommend, and will earnestly try to follow.

I end where I began, with thanks for this invitation, and gratitude for enabling me to put these thoughts together in my own interest--and hopefully yours too.