



Icahn
School of
Medicine at
Mount
Sinai

COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS 2023

DENNIS S. CHARNEY, MD

ICAHN SCHOOL OF MEDICINE AT MOUNT SINAI

Parents and grandparents; family, friends, and faculty; Trustees and honored guests; and Class of 2023, it is a great honor to welcome you to the 54th Commencement Ceremony of the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai!

Class of 2023, you are among the most distinguished graduates of any medical school in the world. You are all enormously talented, passionate, and intelligent, and you have excelled in your studies.

But you also have something more—a priceless quality that will serve you well.

In your first few months here you witnessed something that is not taught in any textbook, nor in any lab. But it is a crucial element to becoming a physician and scientist—character.

You witnessed the strong moral character of our Mount Sinai physicians, nurses, and other medical professionals. You saw them put their lives on the line to battle COVID-19, to save lives.

This is moral courage of the highest order: To accept your obligation to use your training to heal others, to serve those who are suffering, even when confronted with death.

And, you witnessed our scientists, shortly after the onset of the pandemic, return to their laboratories to solve the riddles of the COVID-19 pandemic.

This is the society of service you are entering—a society of honor and integrity that calls upon you to confront adversity and, in the words of poet Alfred Lord Tennyson, to remain “strong in will, to strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.”

I believe, adversity reveals character. And in our time of great adversity, you saw the character of Mount Sinai.

We are a community of medical professionals who are brave, dedicated, and committed to the cause of healing—and who demonstrate courage, which Hemmingway defined, as grace under extreme pressure.

Class of 2023, I saw those traits in you, as you volunteered across the Health System to support our great battle against the pandemic. You helped us save lives.

Winston Churchill said, “Courage is rightly esteemed the first of human qualities because ... it is the quality which guarantees all the others.”

I will always remember you as the Pandemic Class. Your participation in Mount Sinai’s extraordinary response to the pandemic is something that will be with you for the rest of your lives. You will share that experience with your children and grandchildren.

You will share the times when Mount Sinai was the epicenter of the COVID 19 pandemic. You will share the days of darkness when there was little treatment for our infected patients. You will share when loved ones could not visit their dying relatives and our staff had to convey their grief. Yet, you will also share days of light when new treatments were discovered and vaccines prevented serious disease. Yes, you were there!

And, when you look back, it will give you a lasting inner strength that will help you succeed when faced with both professional and personal challenges.

And to paraphrase Henry the Fifth’s St. Crispin’s Day speech at the Battle of Agincourt from Shakespeare’s play:

“... the feats done during the early days of the pandemic by our nurses, by our physicians, by all of our front-line staff, and by you, Class of 2023. These days will be forever remembered. And for those who were not here during those dark days of 2020 and the days of light that followed, perhaps there will be regrets that they were not with us.”

The fact is being a doctor is tough. And, I do know this—you will face dreadful moments. You will face situations where you cannot heal a patient, or worse, where you cannot save a patient. And it will be up to you to have the strength to share the awful news with the patient’s family. To comfort them. To hold their hands. To show

continues >

your deep humanity. You will need to demonstrate compassion, strength of purpose, and moral courage.

But it is also a great privilege to be a doctor. You have earned that privilege to heal, the privilege to help a person at their greatest moment of need.

And, those of you who will pursue scientific research will also face great challenges. It is hard—very hard—to discover new knowledge. You will experience disappointment along the way as you try to make scientific breakthroughs. You may even experience skepticism and ridicule. Do not let it stop you. Do not give up!

Teachers, who are among the most important people in our lives, take existing knowledge and convey it. Far more difficult is the creation of new knowledge—the job of the scientist. But it is a highly noble pursuit—and it too is a privilege.

Six decades ago, when scientists were figuring out how to put a man on the moon, President John F. Kennedy said we choose to go to the moon not because it is easy, but because it is hard, “because that goal will serve to organize and measure the best of our energies and skills, because that challenge is one that we are willing to accept.”

Because being a doctor and scientist is hard, it can take a personal toll. So, as important as it is to care for your patients, you must also care for yourself. Physicians and scientists can suffer excessive degrees of stress, burnout, depression and anxiety.

You cannot pour from an empty cup. So, I want to remind you to constantly build your resilience skills to keep your cup full.

In my own research and in my personal life, I have found these principles to be helpful, especially after I was the victim of a violent shooting seven years ago. Here, for a final time, are a few reminders from my resilience prescription:

- Maintain a positive attitude;
- Allow yourself to reappraise highly stressful, even traumatic events; Put them in proper perspective.

- Nurture your supportive social network;
- Take care of your physical well-being;
- Embrace your personal moral compass.

Admiral William McRaven, the former head of U.S. Special Operations Command who organized and oversaw the raid that took down Osama bin Laden, describes the moral compass as a personal code of honor that will help guide you through the difficult times. “Being a person of high integrity is what separates the great leaders from the commonplace.”

One more way to build resilience and maintain your equilibrium is by giving yourself the perspective to appreciate what you are doing. There is beauty to the daily practice of science and medicine. Even when the days are challenging, you have the opportunity to help people. You have the chance to make new discoveries about human disease.

One of our faculty members, the renowned gastroenterologist Bruce Sands, recently shared his perspective on teaching and practicing medicine at Mount Sinai.

“Even the toughest day in academic medicine is better than almost any other day I can think of in any other career,” Dr. Sands said. “On any day, we do not just teach—we inspire. We do not just do research—we create. And we do not just treat—we heal. Whatever the challenges, we should never forget the privilege we have of doing these things every day, and to be able to do them among a vibrant community of like-minded individuals.”

Class of 2023, now is your time. Now is your time to put your talents and education to work, to heal the sick, to make discoveries, to help humanity.

If not you, who?

If not now, when?

Thank you.