Commencement Address—2003

Physicians and Scientists for Your Grandchildren

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Dean Davis, Mr. May, Dr. Graybiel, Dr. Fuchs, Dean Kase, fellow faculty, all the graduates and their families, my family, friends and guests.

I thank you all for the singular honor that you have bestowed upon me today. In one's lifetime, there is one moment that can be considered to be the capstone of one's career. I can truly say that today is the pinnacle of my own career.

I especially want to thank Dean Kase for having invited me to give this address. There is no one in Avery Fisher Hall more elated than I to see Dr. Kase receive the honorary degree of Doctor of Humane Letters. Nate and I have known each other since 1955, when he was an intern and I was the chief resident in surgery. Everyone associated with Mount Sinai knows what a great chairman of Obstetrics, Gynecology and Reproductive Sciences he was from 1981 – 1985 and what a remarkable dean he was from 1985 – 1997, and how he stepped into the breach as interim chief executive officer and interim dean from 2001 until just a few months ago, and held us together. There are few here today, however, who know how instrumental he was in the formation of this medical school more than 40 years ago. It is a story that bears telling today.

In 1961, the leadership of The Mount Sinai Hospital invited two of the leading medical educators in America to visit the hospital and advise them on whether to proceed with the development of a medical school. A number of then-current research projects were presented to the visitors, including a presentation by Dr. Kase, who was still a resident in Obstetrics and Gynecology but was spending time in research. These presentations, and especially the one by Dr. Kase, so impressed the visitors that they enthusiastically recommended proceeding with the formation of the school. And so Dr. Kase deserves great credit not only for what he has done for the school these past 20+ years, but also for his role in its creation. We are all indebted to Dean Nathan Kase, and I for one salute you.

There are so many other people to whom I owe a personal "thank you" that to name them all would use up my allotted time. There is, however, one person whose love, help, support and encouragement has enabled me to devote so much of my life to Mount Sinai, and who I wish to acknowledge and with whom I share this honor. We have stood side by side for more than fifty- five years. She is a beautiful, great and elegant lady, a wonderful wife, mother, mother-in-law and grandmother. Ladies and gentlemen — Harriet Aufses.

Today, as we honor our graduates and our honorary degree recipients, we celebrate the 34th commencement exercise of the Mount Sinai School of Medicine. This is the 34th commencement address. Previous speakers have included senators and congressmen; leaders in science, ethics and medicine; leaders of great causes; the clergy; and a television personality. For example, in 1973, at Mount Sinai's fourth commencement, the writer and scientist Isaac Asimov was the commencement speaker. Our current chief executive officer and dean, Dr. Kenneth Davis, was a member of that graduating class. Although I am going to ask you, the graduates, some questions in just a moment, I will not ask the dean if he remembers what Dr. Asimov said on that occasion.

There are two adages that are applicable to commencement addresses. The first is: "To be

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seen one must stand up, to be heard one must speak out, and to be appreciated one must sit down." The other is: "Be brief, be brilliant, be gone." I will try to adhere to these statements. Commencement addresses are supposed to present uplifting thoughts for the graduates. Unfortunately, however, they are almost always quickly forgotten. One obvious reason for this is that all of you want to get on with the business at hand. After all, this speaker is one of the few remaining hurdles standing between you and your degrees. I believe that a more important reason however, is the nature of this interaction. I am standing here, immobile, without my usual Powerpoint slides, while you are sitting passively in your seats wondering how long this address will go on. Learning theory says that in order for a lecture to have any impact, the audience must participate and take an active role in the process. And so, I hope to be able to engage you in a way that will, at least, have you remember my main premise.

First, I would ask the graduates to stand and look around them and consider this venue. Avery Fisher Hall has 2,738 seats. Almost every one of those seats is occupied. On the stage In front of you and immediately behind you are the faculty whose teaching and mentoring has enabled you to reach this milestone in your careers. But more than 2,000 of the seats are occupied by your families and your friends. Without their love and support you would not be here today. And so I would ask you to join with me in a salute to all of those who join you here today to help celebrate your graduation.

It has been said that no one ever forgets where they were and what they were doing at critical times in our history, on days such as Pearl Harbor, the day President Kennedy was assassinated, and September 11, 2001. You will certainly never forget today, May 9, 2003, and neither will I. But let's give the graduates a quiz and see how they do with a few other important dates in their own lives. I won't call on anyone by name, but who can tell me what they were doing on August 10, 1999? It was your first day in a Mount Sinai classroom. Does anyone remember who the first speaker was? It was Dr. Hillel Swiller. Does anyone remember the wonderful and apt mnemonic device that he provided you with to help cope with the stresses of medical school? It was R-A-F-T . . . the R standing for Relationships, the A for Autonomy, the F for Fulfillment, and the T for Take good care of yourself. If the RAFT helped you during medical school, it will be even more important in the days, months and years to come.

After Dr. Swiller's opening comments, I participated in a panel discussion with you and told a story. I related that my father, who had come to Mount Sinai in 1921 as an intern and remained on the staff for his entire career, said after retirement that his 50 years in medicine were the greatest in the history of the profession. My comment that day in 1999 was that after 50 years I could say the same thing, and after 50 years in medicine all of you will probably make the same statement. It is less than four years since your first day, but I think you would agree that the progress in genomics and gene therapy, as examples, starts your first half-century in medicine on a great journey. As an arch Mount Sinai chauvinist, I hasten to add that a great deal of that new knowledge has emanated from your school.

I have entitled this address "Physicians and Scientists for Your Grandchildren" and would like to focus on the role that you will play in producing those physicians and scientists. Although when I look at all of you, much of my concern regarding the availability of physicians and scientists for subsequent generations disappears, I always worry about the possibility that some day, the best and brightest of our young people will shun medicine and science. Medicine and science have been under siege for at least two decades, and even though applications to medical schools are up again after many years of steady decline, we cannot become complacent. All of you took a bold step in choosing to enter medicine and science. You, our graduates, are the individuals who must take the responsibility for recruiting and then teaching the next generation of physicians and scientists.

Last year, in his commencement address to the Class of 2002, Dr. Barry Coller spoke on "Science and Humanism: The Twin Pillars of Medicine" (1). Medical schools are based upon a tripod — the legs of the tripod representing patient care, teaching, and research. We can equate Dr. Coller's science and humanism with research and patient care. Today I would like to center my remarks around the third leg of that tripod — teaching, the teaching that all of you are going to be doing throughout your careers and that will be critical to the training of your successors. The verb "teach" has several meanings pertinent to my comments. In addition to "instruct" and to "impart knowledge," it also means to "show, guide, and/or direct." Teaching is also a form of mentoring.

Lest any of you think that you are not teachers, I would submit that all of you have been teaching since you have been at Mount Sinai; most of you probably started much earlier. This is a wonderful, collegial class that has worked together from day one. You have taught each other, you have taught the students in the classes behind you, you have taught college and high school students, you have taught us, the faculty, and in the future you are going to be teaching your successors. But most of all, you have taught patients and their families. And it is critical that you do not forget that role in your interactions with your patients. You will be teaching them about health in general and their various illnesses in particular. And as lifelong learners you will always live up to the adage "teach thyself." One of the definitions of "teach" noted earlier is to "guide." You are also going to have to guide your patients along the many paths that their illnesses take them; in many instances it will not be easy for either them or you.

And now I want to ask you about another very important day in your lives. Where were you at 4:00 PM on September 8, 1999? That was the day of your "White Coat Ceremony." Dr. Daniel W. Foster, the chairman of the Department of Medicine at Southwestern Medical School in Dallas, was the speaker. Some of his wonderful comments bear repeating (2). First, he reminded you of the four characteristics of the physician as espoused by Sir William Osler. After quoting Osler, Dr. Foster commented, "These, then, are the characteristics of true physicians: to keep the noble heritage, to fight disease, to be constantly progressive, and to remain always benevolent." But then he added, "This life is sometimes hard. You will have hard times in your studies. One is fairly often tired, both as a student and as a practitioner. It is hard also because we do not always win the battle against disease and have to participate in suffering and death." And then Dr. Foster told you a story: "One of my best friends and colleagues on the faculty has a metastatic colon cancer. The outcome is uncertain, but I think it will be easier for him because I will accompany him on that journey. And that will be a privilege. A hard privilege, but a privilege."

I knew that individual. He was also a friend and a colleague of mine. He died last summer. It was, as Dr. Foster noted, a very difficult journey, but made easier because Dr. Foster was there to guide him and his family. You too will have to guide your patients down difficult paths. Never leave, neglect, or abandon them. I remind you of the story because "to teach" has many meanings. You will bring all of them to bear on your patients and on your profession.

In a few moments you will take the Oath of Maimonides and take a vow to live by its principles. This version of the Oath of Maimonides does not speak to teaching others, but stresses constant self-learning — "teach thyself." On White Coat Ceremony Day in September 1999, you took the Oath of Hippocrates. At that time you agreed "to consider dear to me as my parents those who taught me this art, to live in common with them and if necessary to share my goods with them, to look upon their children as my own brothers and sisters, to teach them this art if they so desire without fee or written promise, to impart to my sons and daughters and the children of the Masters who taught me and the disciples who have enrolled themselves and have agreed to the rule of the profession, but to these alone, the precepts and the instruction." Yes, ladies and gentlemen, you took an oath to teach — forsake it not!

And finally, I would ask the graduates one last question. Where were you at noon on March 20, 2003? It was Match Day! On that day you learned where you will begin the next phase of your future careers. And it was a great day for each of you and for the entire class. You exceeded your own expectations as well as the expectations of the school's leadership.

It was Albert Einstein who said, "I never think of the future. It comes soon enough." Your future is here and now. Take it and run with it. Do your job well and the world will beat a path to your door. You will be superb physicians, scientists, counselors and teachers in every sense of the word. You will be respected and admired by your patients, your colleagues and your many students. And if all that happens, as I know it will, you and I will never have to worry about having physicians and scientists for your grandchildren!

One final word. As you go your separate ways, never forget your fellow students and where you began your medical careers. You were fortunate to go to an outstanding medical school that is still in its relative youth, now just 40 years old. You had much of your clinical training in a hospital that has just celebrated its 150th anniversary. When you complete your first 50 years in medicine (which we talked about earlier), this medical school and this hospital will be approaching 100 and 200 years of age, respectively. As of this moment, you become part of a great heritage and a great tradition. You will always be a part of us, and we will always remember you and support you.

All of us in this vast hall wish you the very best, for much luck and success.

Thank you.

References

1. Coller BS. Science and humanism: the twin pillars of medicine. Mt Sinai J Med 2002; 69:277 – 279.
2. Foster DW. To be a physician. Mt Sinai J Med 2000; 67:133 – 135.