

Commencement Address

May 2005

IT IS AN ENORMOUS PRIVILEGE to stand before you today. As you know, it is a commencement for all of us, and a parting with its bittersweet emotions. June 2, 1976 was my graduation day from medical school, and in preparation for this talk I decided to try and remember who gave the commencement speech. Well, I have no memory of it whatsoever. I eventually found the program, and it was the then-mayor of New York, Mr. Abe Beame. So I called the people at NYU and asked what he said that day. No one knew. I wondered if there was any record. I looked in the *New York Times* for the following day: nothing. So I have a challenge here. My challenge is to see that 25 years from now you will at least remember that I spoke to you today.

William Osler is quoted as asking medical students at Johns Hopkins, in the early 1900s, on their first day, "Are you tough enough to be doctors?" I would ask all of you today, "Do you have the courage to move into the world that we are all facing?" The often-quoted opening of Charles Dickens's novel, "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times," seems always relevant to medicine and perhaps never more than today.

It is amazing that today, when doctors have such effective tools of diagnosis and therapy, and can truly change the course of human disease, we find ourselves in such a quagmire as a profession. Biomedical science has the tools to answer many questions at the molecular and atomic level, and yet the funding for research may be decreasing, the political interference in biomedical research is increasing, and people are demanding of physicians and researchers to prove the value for the dollars being spent. This is indeed a new world.

One thing that has happened in this new world and that it is very sad for all of us, is that there has been a general loss of trust. Without trust by all who relate to medicine, medicine is a very difficult profession. Ask yourself why, with all this potency of diagnosis and therapy, patients seem disgruntled. They cannot easily get to see the doctor. More and more patients are disenfranchised from our health care system. Doctors do not seem to be listening. Five-minute visits after months of waiting

are not satisfactory. The doctors seem disgruntled. There is early retirement. There is early burnout. The people who pay for care are convinced they are not getting their money's worth.

What is going on? The ability to deliver effective care has not translated into professional satisfaction for anyone.

We have the ability to prevent disease, understand the etiology of every common ailment almost at the molecular level, and yet we have an epidemic of obesity, diabetes, and heart disease. The prevention of many types of cancer is readily attainable, yet such prevention is rare, because, among other reasons, some people are uninsured and do not get preventive care, and many medical practices have never instituted the systems necessary to really deliver good preventive care. We have a technologically supercharged health care system, and yet patients are crying out that no one listens to them. The health care system in this country is spending money like never before, yet more and more people do not even receive health care. The world is ready to spend trillions of dollars on weapons, and yet the continent of Africa is being ravaged by a disease for a lack of medication that would cost a thousandth of that amount.

You really have a lot of challenges, so let's reflect. Let's think about this whole idea of commencement, because "commencement" is an interesting word. Yes, it means beginning, but we know that this is more than a beginning today. Today is an end of one part of your life and the beginning of another. You came here wearing Birkenstocks and ragged t-shirts, and thought you were really fantastic. You were the envy of everyone. Then you were transformed over four years, and today the crowning glory of that transformation is that henceforth people will call you doctor. And that is a heavy load. There is a lot that goes with being a doctor. You receive instant credibility and instant prestige from the entire world around you. You sometimes can't stop people from calling you doctor. You wonder if, for a moment, you can stop being a doctor. But you can't. Being a doctor is

24/7, and people understand that. They understand that you are not the same person you used to be. You see the world as a doctor does. You relate to people as a doctor does, and you have responsibilities 24/7, the way a doctor does.

Although you receive lots of benefits, this is not a one-way street; it is really a social contract. If you accept this role and you really allow the personal transformation to happen, special things follow. People let you inside their private lives in a way that they let no one else. Every day that I see patients, I am in awe of what I learn from them and this unique privilege they grant me. Let me tell you one story, because, as you know, I love telling stories.

A story of one day, when I was startled by being let inside the magic of someone's life. I was making a house call to a woman who was dying of an abdominal tumor. She had a bowel obstruction, but she didn't want to go to the hospital; in fact, she was clearly coming to the end of her life. I had spent many hours talking to her about her medical history. That day I drove out to her house, where she was being cared for by her 90-year-old mother. She and the mother had emigrated from Greece years earlier.

I went in and sat with her, and we talked about pain control and her symptom management and how it was getting close to the end. She said to me at the end of our talk, "Dr. Smith, I lied to you, and I need to set it right." I said, "OK, what did you lie to me about?" I couldn't imagine any untruth that was really relevant to this woman who was withering away in front of my eyes. She replied, "Take the picture from the end table." It was a photo of her mother. She said, "Open the back of the picture." Out dropped another photo, one of her and a young man when they were probably about 20 years old. She said, "Remember, you kept asking me if I ever had another person in my life, if I had been married, and I kept telling you, no, no, no? Well, you are now the only person who knows."

She then told me a story of what it was like to live in a small village in Greece during the Nazi occupation and how incredibly euphoric it was when the Americans liberated her town. She told me how she fell in love with an American soldier and had a wild love affair that lasted all of three weeks, until his unit moved on. She never saw him again, and all she had from that affair was this picture hidden behind her mother's, and no one had ever seen it except her. She said she wanted to make sure I knew all about her before she died.

I remember driving home that day wondering, am I really ready for this? If people are going to let me that deep into their personal lives, I'd better be pretty respectful and I'd better remember what a privilege this is.

Now, you are all going to be moving on to the next step of your careers, and you are going to be busy. You are going to be mastering medicine and you will soon be the masters of the universe of medicine. You will know all the high tech stuff. You will know what tests to order and how to organize your workday. But let me give you some advice.

Don't cheat yourselves. Medicine is not really about technology and tests. It is not even about the income. Medicine is all about the patients. So promise me something. Every single day of your life, with at least one patient, put the brakes on. Stop. Sit down and learn who that person is. Just calmly sit and have a conversation and remind yourself that the privilege of doctoring has all of its roots in the sanctity of the relationship between you and your patients. It can never be a job. It can never be a business. It is always a sacred trust, and all the respect you will get for the rest of your life stems from your being true to that trust.

Medicine is also a field of action. It doesn't matter that you know things. It only matters if you *do* things. And when you do them, you have to be effective. And to be effective, people have to trust you and believe in you. Being a successful physician is not primarily about being right or about being smart. By the end of your career, people are going to benchmark your success not by whether you can pass a test, but by whether the patients entrusted to your care did well. Never lose sight of that benchmark.

I truly believe that you have to take care of yourselves. You have to be parents, husbands, and wives. You have to have a life outside of medicine, but don't think that striking a balance in your life in any way stops you from deeply falling in love with taking care of patients and being a doctor.

We have to be grateful to all our teachers—our professors, our parents, our mentors. But never forget that the teachers who teach you the most may be your patients, and you need to be eternally grateful that they put their trust in you, novice physicians learning the craft of medicine by practice.

Let me conclude with a wish for all of us. That wish is that we take care of ourselves, that we as a profession love one another, that we take care of our patients and do good, and that we have a life of joy in doing so.

Good luck and congratulations.

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