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On May 20, I gave the commencement address at the Columbia College of Physicians and Surgeons. It was a particular honor because the Dean, Lee Goldman, was my medical school advisor and an influential mentor. Lee is a pioneer in outcomes research, with a legacy of contributions that have impacted clinical practice. It was so meaningful to share the stage with him and reflect on all that has occurred in the intervening years. In an off-script moment, I expressed how fortunate I felt and suggested that the graduates imagine having a mentor who would truly influence the course of their career, and then imagine 30 years on being invited by him to give the commencement address at the school where he was Dean. With this in mind, I wanted to provide them with words that might help them on their path. My speech, which can also be found online at http://livestream.com/accounts/7252613/events/4014859, follows. I hope that it might be helpful to others.

Graduates, let’s take a moment to honor this occasion and celebrate the love that surrounds you, what you have achieved, and the promise of your future. Today is a day not only for congratulations but also one for welcoming you into the community of medicine, with all the responsibilities that implies. You are imbued now with not only the knowledge but also the influence, trust, and yes, power, of your position.

You were selected not only for your brains but also for your heart. Being a doctor means stepping forward, not back, when someone needs you. By accepting your diploma, you prove to them that they made a good choice. That you will do right by them. And because of that, they trust you. And they hope that you share things that they may have not told their spouse, their friends, and their family. They do so because you are a doctor.

What other job could give you so many possibilities and so many ways to contribute to the lives of others? It is the highest form of giving to help those who cannot help you back. People who minutes ago were strangers will confide in you and often participate in your deliberations. They do so because you are a doctor. And because of that, they trust you. And they hope that you will do right by them.

So, I never faced the indecision about a career that my peers did, or even my children have. A doctor was always the one who taught me the most about what it really means to be a doctor. The responsibility of it—the satisfaction of it—the possibilities of it. That being a doctor was not about proving to them that they made a good choice. That you will do right by them.

And this is where the greatest privilege of all occurs—to prove to them that they made a good choice. That you will honor that trust. That you will extend yourself for them. You will learn for them. You will help them. And you will know that this precious part of medicine will do as much for you as it does for them. When people thank me for what I have done to help them, I thank them back for the privilege—for the opportunity to use what I have learned, for the opportunity to make a difference in their lives, and for how that makes me feel.
You are entering medicine at an amazing moment. The number and effectiveness of tools in our armamentarium are expanding daily. You are witnessing breathtaking technology, novel drugs, rapidly evolving policies, new models of healthcare delivery, and the potential to harness big data. These changes will reform our understanding of illness and health, our classifications of disease, our approach to prognosis, and the structure of our healthcare organizations and professional roles. In this era of innovation and improvement, your imagination will be your only limitation. You have arrived just in time.

So if you had any doubts, let me be really clear. You have so made the right choice. Parents, no need to worry, your children are perfectly positioned to be in the slipstream of one of the most exciting decades of medical history. Whatever it took for them to get here, rest assured that they are in the right place.

So now to the secrets that I have to share. The secrets to careers in which you go to bed wishing you had more time—when the hours are long and the tasks are arduous, you feel defiant because you always know you are engaged in the good fight and when you are tired, and you will be, it is a good tired, one that sets you at peace. So here goes…

**Always Go for the Big Win**

This one is directly for you. You are in a remarkable position where you can take risks with your career and not fear the consequences. You can always find a job. So commit to yourself that you will find your place in the world where you can fulfill your promise and do it in a way that feeds your soul. This is not just a “find your passion” piece of advice—it is a practical reality that you have no reason to be risk averse in your career. I took an academic position knowing so little of academic life and what was required to succeed. But I figured that if it was not for me, I could always find some other opportunity. And now I appreciate that there are so many more roles for you than I ever envisioned for myself. And if the professional position you want does not exist, see if you can create it.

The big win also applies to your private life. Be purposeful in your choices and configure your job to get the life you want. I wanted to be a good dad. I have 4 children; I wanted to coach their sports teams, and I made it an appointment in my calendar. I made it fit. When I traveled to far off places, I took them. When they asked for me to do something, I never said no—even when it meant that time for my work would stretch into the early morning hours.

I remember sitting down with my Chair to discuss my career. I had made a priority list of what I wanted to accomplish and at the top of the list was my family. It startled him, but it was honest. It was all part of the big win.

So remember this: do it on your terms. Take risks for what is important to you. You really don’t have much to lose. You’ll never starve. Go big or go home.

**Always Go for Big Impact**

Given your talent and your skills—whatever it was that got you this far—you’d better be working on problems that are big and impactful. No matter what, choose to make the world better in as many ways as you can.

The problems that most interested me had to do with injustice, abuse of power, secrecy, waste, and ineptitude. With every project, we said that we wanted to help as many people as possible. We wanted to combine scholarship with action—be results oriented.

When we wanted to improve the time to treating heart attacks, we started a movement that created a new normal—that was built from National Institutes of Health–funded science. When we realized that people were being readmitted at shocking rates, we sought to illuminate the neglected problem and, ultimately, to put hospitals in a position where it made financial sense to invest in solutions. When we realized that many studies are done but not published and few investigators share data although it would be in society’s interest, we sought novel collaborations to make it so. Now, I am occupied with helping patients get access and control of their own data, freeing the data for them to share and use however, wherever, and whenever they want.

What are the big problems that you want to solve? I am here to tell you that many will say that whatever big impact you seek is impossible or at least difficult. No change is easy. You need an irressistible optimism that anything is possible. And whatever is true today may not be true tomorrow. Just know you need to do your homework, work hard, be persistent and creative. Figure out where you want to make your dent in the universe. And then go for it.

**Always Be Aware of Time**

Money, fame, and possessions pale in comparison with time. You may feel that you have an abundance of it now, but as you move forward, you will understand how precious it is. Again, be purposeful. Who is going to get your time? Will you know when a little dose will go a long way? Will you know when to move forward, you will understand how precious it is. Again, be purposeful. Who is going to get your time? Will you know when to take a moment to make a big difference?

I remember a particular patient, a woman with chronic heart failure, who needed a wheelchair to get around. She resided in an assisted living facility. On that day, I was running late and quickly came into the room, talked with her briefly, established that she had no recent change in her symptoms, and did a quick examination. I was about to walk out, having completed my documentation, and told her that there was no need to change anything.

But then for a moment, I stood at the door and looked at her. Really looked at her. She was a dignified older woman who had a bearing of consequence. She was impeccably dressed, and the room was full with the smell of her perfume. I turned around, sat next to her. We didn’t say anything for a minute. Just sat. And then I asked her to tell me about her day. She recounted how she had woken early and began a long preparation for this visit. She had bathed, picked out a wardrobe, and dressed up, with some considerable effort. Then she waited for the bus to bring her to the clinic.

She did not disclose an ounce of frustration, but what I heard sounded like she had endured an ordeal to wait by the curb, be loaded into the vehicle, be delivered to the hospital, be assisted to the clinic, and then wait for her delayed
appointment. And I recognized my role to honor her effort and let her know that I noticed and cared. For me, she was another patient that day in a busy afternoon. For her, this was an event that had been long anticipated and important. This recollection may seem ordinary, but that moment has always stuck with me. It was all about time. And how I needed to know that was what she needed.

I read a book about a man who was diagnosed with terminal brain cancer. He was intent on taking the time to saying his goodbyes while he was still clear thinking and strong. He drew concentric circles to describe his relationships, with his closest family at the center and those most distant in the periphery. And he started meeting with people on the outside and working his way in. He made it through the first 2 outer circles when his disease took a turn for the worse. With his last bit of insight—and his most important message of the book—he realized that he should have started in the middle.

Use your time in the way you want according to what is most important to you. Be purposeful.

Always Build Bridges

By bridges I mean relationships. Success is a team sport. Whether on the wards, in the laboratory, in government, in business, in our communities, and with your family. What will make the difference—what you will remember—is the relationships. I am blessed with a spouse that shares my passions and has enriched my life. My colleagues are my friends.

In my professional life, I always say that I only play the long game. Only in the long-term can you be sure that trust, honor, respect, and love will win out. In my collaborations, I always start by asking what I can do to help my partner succeed.

Our team’s success with working with the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services came because we did not seek data from them. Their history with academics was a legal exercise surrounding the quest for access to government data. We sought to collaborate with them in their desire to improve care, and over time, we were able to conduct studies to illuminate opportunities for improvement.

We have a remarkable collaboration in China that began with relationships that have grown over time. We are doing outstanding science and see ourselves as not only a single team but a single family working together from 2 different cultures. We learn from each other. And the same with our work in our own local communities. If you pay it forward, give without expectation of receiving—seek common interests and aspirations—you will find the rewards. Know that at the end of your career, these relationships, these bridges, will have the most meaning.

And it goes without saying that the most important relationships are with those who are closest to you. My family is here with me today. They have made all the difference to me.

Always Put the Patient First

I saved this one for last. How did we develop a system that is so often tone deaf to the real needs of people? Maybe it starts with our words. I want to ban the word patients. I think it adds distance. It can depersonalize. Use their names.

Let’s commit to see the person first. How do you do that? You remove the distance. A useful device that I teach now is to ask people to tell me something special about them—to convey an amazing story—or tell me something about them or their family that is memorable. I have yet to find someone who does not have such a story. When they tell us about what food dish that they make better than anyone or how they are the best car mechanic in their neighborhood or how they celebrate birthdays with their family, then they become for us the real people they are—not just a disease or a patient.

Then, let’s commit to see the experience through their eyes. For example, what is it like to be a person in the hospital? If anyone in the audience has recently been in the hospital then you know. It is usually nothing short of a stress test. You are exposed to loud noises, noxious smells, sleep interruptions, circadian rhythm disruptions, poor nutrition, forced inactivity, and general loss of control. On any given day, you were not told what was in store, including what might happen and when.

What if we worked with the systems to create a less stressful, more healing, more respectful environment? Recently, colleagues and I just published a piece in the Annals of Internal Medicine in which we ask why adult hospitals cannot be more like pediatric hospitals. Pediatric hospitals have bright colors to lift your spirits, music to calm your nerves, small needles to reduce the volume of blood drawn, and a culture of including families, not disturbing sleep, and being sensitive to psychological needs. They may not be perfect, but they seem to devote themselves to comforting those who are ill.

And the world is changing. People with illness are no longer passive, and you need to know how to empower and dignify and respect those who seek your care. People are increasingly getting access to their digital health data. They are writing notes, sometimes from their hospital beds, which are getting in the charts. E-Patient Dave, a noted patient advocate, wrote a book entitled, Let Patients Help. We are now welcoming families on rounds. They are in procedures. They are even at resuscitations. Turns out their presence is good for them, which is good for us. Our professionalism increases, and maybe our effectiveness. And they are better able to cope with what happens. And we are including them in research as partners not just subjects.

Help with this movement. Change the balance of power. Put people first. Join me in putting the conception of a patient to rest and ushering in a notion of people who we can engage, empower, and strengthen as partners. We are not there to impose our values, we are there to help them pursue a course that is consistent with their wishes. This will represent a massive paradigm shift in medicine—it is about time.

Conclusions

So here you stand. An eventful day at the end of years of learning and friendships and memories. And hopes for the future.

You are here at the right time and the right place. Now seize the moment, whether your focus is on providing care, generating knowledge, teaching students, or any of so many possibilities.

Your journey is just beginning. Use your brains and your heart. We are depending on you. Godspeed.

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