

## *Graduation Address*

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### *Introduction*

Graduates ... what a momentous time for you as you launch your life's pilgrimage as a health professional. I know firsthand the arduous journey you have taken to arrive at this day. Your commitment, discipline, and intellectual labors are deserving of commendation and applause! Congratulations!

I have been asked to challenge you with the excitement and opportunities that await you in your lives and profession.

I want to approach my task in somewhat of a paradoxical manner; for I want to ask you to think with me about the beginning of your career -- by looking at its end. Together I want us to explore the ends of your professional life as a way of looking at the means of your vocational choice. I take courage in this endeavor from the words of the Danish philosopher of the 19th Century, Soren Kierkegaard, who wrote, "*life can only be understood backward, but it must be lived forward.*" Possibly if we look at the reflected experience of some of the world's great thinkers -- we can understand human life a little better, and more specifically our *own* lives.

There is nothing as tragic as the wasting of a human life! Anticipating or visualizing what you want life to be can be the most significant step in transforming your dreams into a life of reality. Among my favorite proverbs is one of Professor Huston Smith, among our nation's most outstanding philosophers of religion. Professor Smith said: "*What you see determines who you are, and who you are determines what you do.*" I take it as our enterprise today to visualize or see potential futures for you and your life ... in order that you may become who you want to be; and do the things necessary to realize your vision.

Great truths are enmeshed in simple stories. Among our culture's favorite stories is Alice, and her "*Adventures in Wonderland.*" You remember her encounter

with the Cheshire cat?

*The cat only grinned when it saw Alice. It looked good-natured she thought; still it had very long claws and a great many teeth so she felt that it ought to be treated with respect. Cheshirepuss, she began, rather timidly as she did not at all know whether it would like the name. However, it only grinned a little wider. Come it's pleased so far, thought Alice, and she went on. Would you tell me please which way I ought to go from here? That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,' said the Cat. I don't much care where - said Alice. Then it doesn't much matter which way you go said the Cat. -- Oh, so long as I get somewhere! Alice added as an exclamation. Oh, you're sure to do that, said the Cat, if you only walk long enough.*

Louis Carroll's classic offers a profound lesson to us. It's possible for us to journey through life, without a life's map, without explicit goals; and after years of wandering, realize that we have really not followed the path we should have, to reach the destination we had hoped to reach. In a course in professional ethics that I teach at the University of Kentucky, I ask our students to reflect on their life-time goals by writing their own eulogy. My goal is explicit. Moving to the end of one's life, and reflecting on how one would want to be remembered, helps to suggest what one's meaningful priorities and values really are. This is one of the lessons in a very popular book, still on the bestseller lists ... Stephen Covey's Seven Habits of Highly Effective People. He states it as one of his seven *habits* -- "*begin with the end in mind.*" This afternoon, I would like to encourage you to begin your professional pilgrimage with the end in mind.

### *The Good Life*

Concern for the good life, and the means for obtaining it, has been a consuming theme of humanity since ancient times. Few have improved upon or challenged Aristotle's expression that the goal of life is the (in the Greek) "*eudamonia*," - sometimes translated as happiness; sometimes well-being. Aristotle defined happiness as "*a complete life, lived in accordance with virtue, and attended by moderate supply of external goods.*" The Greek word translated virtue, "*arete*," literally means excellence. Aristotle argues for well-

being as the goal of one's life, with this happiness consisting in living a life of excellence. And, it's important to also note that for the Greeks "*excellence*" (arete) meant "*the fulfillment of function.*"

Humanity is on a quest for excellence; we all want to find "*fulfillment in functioning*" as human beings. Ernest Becker, author of the Pulitzer prize winning book, The Denial of Death, argues that humanity is driven by a need to both be a part of something, and to stick out. Humans need to be conforming members of winning teams and yet stand out as stars. Today, there is a virtual litany of seminars and symposia in every realm of human endeavor teaching us how to excel.

Bookstores and libraries are replete with the literature of excelling. We want to excel professionally. We want quality relationships with our spouses, our children, and the significant others in our lives. Not only do we establish standards of excellence for ourselves and our personal performance, but we have also honed and refined our aesthetic taste and technological demands. High fidelity audiovisual equipment and with sound and visual refinements to beyond our ability detect; gourmet foods and vintage wines whose bouquets are beyond our capacity to identify. Even those who never seem to arrive on time to any event insist on watches accurate to the millisecond. The standard of performance demanded by us in many areas of endeavor far outstrips our legitimate needs; yet the continual striving for improvement and excellence seems inherent in our constitution and has much to commend it. Excellence is the conforming of a thing to its essential nature or constitution. It is the fulfilling of function!

In the words of the distinguished 20th Century American psychologist, Abraham Maslow, to excel is to be what it is one can be. It is the need we have to actualize our potential. It can be phrased as the need we have to become more and more what we are, to become everything we are capable of becoming ... to achieve and fulfill our essential nature as human beings. To fail to actualize our potential is to be mediocre, to be of moderate or of low quality. Mediocrity is an aversion. Psychologically it is inharmonious with our need to stand out. The Academy Award winning movie *Amadeus* portrayed the destructiveness of a sensed-mediocrity in the life of the composer Salieri and his quest for the excellence of Mozart. Salieri's quest turned pathologic for he failed to recognize the excellence of his own performance; he had achieved his potential. His error came in coveting the potential of another. The

revulsion from mediocrity and the craving for quality is underscored by a variety of societal trends. American business, faced with declining profits and prestige is discovering the competitive advantage of excellence -- of quality in performance. Public education, confronted with declining standardized test scores and ill-equipped graduates, is searching for ways to restore quality in the classroom. Public officials, stung with numerous moral failings and a loss of confidence with the public, are appealing for moral excellence in the corridors of government. I return to Kierkegaard who said, *"a truly great personality seeks to realize his life in the following manner, he strives to develop himself with the utmost exertion of his powers."* Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, the sage of death and dying, sums up our quest for excellence, *"don't scream at death when you realize you were not all you could be."* Life's end--happiness; life's means--excellence ... fulfilling one's function, that is, achieve one's unique potential.

### *The Professional Life*

You have chosen the health professions as the form for living out your humanness. While the ultimate goal, or end, of your life is happiness or well-being, your unique means of achieving that goal is through the vocation or profession of caring for the health of others. What is involved in professing this as your life's strategy for existence? The root of *"profession"* is *"profess."* To profess is literally to make a vow or promise. Professing health care is the making of a promise; the commitment of one's life, in serving the health of society.

The metaphor of *"covenant"* has been employed in conceptualizing the relationship entered into by the professional and the patient, and by the profession and society. In its ancient and most influential form, a covenant between individuals or groups included a pledge or promise, an exchange of gifts to seal the promise made, and finally, but significantly, a change of *"being"* of the covenanted. Marriage is our culture's most common covenant. The granting by society of the status of *"professional"* to a group of individuals is also the establishment of a covenant. Society promises the health profession that it will grant a virtual monopoly to the profession with the opportunity for significant personal gain. The profession promises to serve society faithfully and fairly. Society gives the gift of education and the privilege of self-government in return for the profession's giving of its

talents and abilities. In this covenantal relationship the nature of "*being*" is changed. Individuals become professionals; in our instance, "*health professionals*," as you become today; and the individuals in society, our friends gathered with us today, become "*patients*." From this day forward, you will always be known in your role as a health professional. The professional covenant is reaffirmed on an individual basis each time two persons enter into a relationship where one agrees to be the healer and the other patient. The duty of the health professional is rooted in the prior covenant of the profession with society. And the health professional realizes that there is full reciprocity in the relationship. Patients give themselves to us and we give ourselves to patients. Without us giving to the patient, the patient could not gain the benefits of health and without the patient giving to us, we could not be health professionals. This understanding of mutual benefit and reciprocity is essential to a reasonable professional ethic ... and an appropriate humility.

### *Relating Means to End*

So ... we have seen that our ultimate goal in life is happiness. At the end of our lives who among us would not want to be able to say that we lived lives of happiness. And we have chosen the health professions to achieve Aristotle's definition of a complete life lived in accordance with excellence. Now let us test the value or validity of the means we have chosen against the standard of human need; again so well-expressed by Abraham Maslow. Can the health professions, as our means of pursuing personal happiness, meet the test of Maslow's classical paradigm for understanding our human nature and our human needs?

According to Maslow's theory of motivation all human beings are motivated or moved to action, by a number of basic needs which are species-wide, apparently unchanging, genetic or institutional in origin, and somewhat hierarchical in arrangement. They are intrinsic aspects of our human nature. Among the most powerful are the needs we have for human survival, our physiologic needs: air, water, food, sleep, shelter, and sex. Closely related to these physiologic needs and also designated by Maslow as basic needs, are safety and security needs. It is not possible for us to pursue Maslow's hierarchy of human needs further if we do not have a sense of physical and psychological safety. We need the security of a consistent, predictable, stable, and fair environment. These basic needs -- physiologic,

safety, and security -- are generally met by human beings through purchasing in the marketplace. [We'll exclude our sexual needs from that generalization for the sake of prudence!] Since these basic needs are purchased, we must ask the question: *"Do the health professions allow us to earn the income necessary to be successful in the marketplace?"* Put another way, can I buy food, shelter, clothing, transportation, and security for myself and my family as a result of living my life as a health care professional? We probably do not need a lot of reflection or documentation to answer that question in the affirmative ... in fact a very positive affirmative. The present reality, and the future prospects for health professionals economically, are nothing short of spectacular. This is a golden age for our professions. How's that for hyperbole? But it's no exaggeration! The average income of health professionals today places us in the upper echelon of income earners in the United States. And those means (in the sense of averages) are not mean (in the sense of ordinary) for one to purchase one's means, (in the sense of the ability) to buy Aristotle's *"moderate supply of external goods essential to happiness."* I can buy a lot of food, clothing, shelter, and security with that amount of money. A brief cautioning note: Parents, this economic attainment is one achieved in year one of professional practice—be patient.

But, as we all know, the procurement of these basic needs, what we commonly call the material things of life, are not those things that really satisfy and fulfill human existence. Let's revisit Aristotle. Aristotle said that happiness was a life lived in accordance with excellence, and here's the important part, accompanied by a moderate supply of external goods. Aristotle acknowledged that we do have to have material goods in order to pursue a course of happiness. But ... one cannot be happy, without pursuing the more noble and fulfilling aspects of human existence. Maslow acknowledges this by moving on in his hierarchy.

When we have some sense that our physiologic and safety needs have been satisfied, then social needs emerge. Maslow says *"people will hunger for affectionate relationships with people in general, for a place in a group and will strive with great intensity to achieve that goal."* Our social needs include the need for acceptance, for belongingness, for affection, and for love. To quote Maslow on love, *"the need for love characterizes every human person; no psychological health is possible unless a person is accepted and loved, by others."* The practice of the health professions is by its very nature social. Ninety percent of the time we spend is time spent caring for patients. And I do not use the word 'caring' with impunity. For caring is the quintessential

quality or characteristic, or to use Aristotle -- virtue of our practice. What a sense of gratification and satisfaction we receive from knowing that we are genuinely caring for the health of our patients. And what a sense of fulfillment comes from the appropriation of our unique knowledge, and abilities to enhance our patient's health. In addition to working with our patients, the health professions offer great opportunity for social interaction-- for teamwork with our colleagues. Successful practitioners will rapidly affirm that their success in large measure relates to the team of individuals that they have gathered to support the provision of care. Health care practice is a highly social environment; and that social environment helps in substantive ways fulfill our human social needs.

Maslow's hierarchal configuration of human needs next suggest that we are motivated by ego needs. All humans struggle, but generally struggle successfully to gain a sense of self-esteem, self-confidence, and self-respect. This develops as a result of gaining mastery in an area, of feeling competent as a human being to perform meaningful work. Interestingly enough, the more confident and capable we become, the more productive we become. We not only need to feel good about ourselves, but we realize that we cannot feel good about ourselves unless others feel good about us as well. That is, we must have the respect or esteem of others and the recognition that ensues. Our sense of ourselves, deriving from our sense of our esteem in the eyes of others, is most stable when it is perceived that it is deserved. When we practice our profession with integrity, when we apply our knowledge and skills excellently; when we fulfill the function of being a health professional to the utmost of our ability; we will feel that we deserve the respect that we will no doubt gain! Our professions, routinely and regularly in public opinion polls, rank in the top most respected vocations in the United States. There is no doubt in my mind that being a member of the health professions will allow you to have your human ego needs satisfied.

Finally Abraham Maslow points us to the top of his pyramid of human need. As I suggested earlier, he says all we humans have a constitutional need to actualize their full potential. Maslow has become world famous for his concept of self-actualization. Synonyms for self-actualization include self-fulfillment, self-realization, self-development. Listen as Maslow: *"a person can be he or she must be. Growth, development, realization of potential; making actual who you really are in the very depths of your being, is the driving force for human endeavor; to become more and more what one is to*

*become; everything one is capable of becoming.* All of you will recognize that this theoretical notion of self-actualization has been appropriated to the marketplace in extraordinarily effective ways by the United States Army. It was Maslow who said *"be all that you can be"* and now the Army challenges us to be all we can be ... in the Army. I challenge you to be all you can be -- in your profession of health care.

There are a number of dimensions of our humanity that require fulfillment or actualization. We humans are creative beings and we create are our own existence as we live through time. If we can appropriate Maslow's notion of self-actualization to the various dimension of our lives, I think we can see how our profession is a remarkable life's calling. We are social beings, and as I have suggested there are few vocations or professions in our society that are more social than the health care professions. We have intellectual needs; and certainly health care is a challenging field grounded in a sophisticated science based in biology requiring health professionals to be clinical scientists. We are kinesthetic beings. For tens of thousands of year our ancestors lived by hunting and gathering. They used their bodies to eke out a subsistent existence and from them we have inherited a need to be active with our bodies in our work. While there are some professions or vocations that require intellectual work, there are not all that many that require the active involvement of the intellect applied to problems and to people in such a manner that activate perceptual-motor skills. Among the things I find health professionals most gratified by is their ability to use their minds, coordinated with their eyes and hands, in helping other people. We are artistic being; not in a narrow sense, but in the larger sense of art as an expression of inward depth and meaning. Not only are we called to work with our hands, but we are called to work with our being in creating new structures; structures of remarkable form, function and esthetics. We are artists, and art is among the highest calling of man. There is a reason we speak of the art and science of health care. Identify for me another profession that draws on so many dimensions of one's humanness, and other profession, that as a consequence, permits one to actualize all of the potential of existence in quite the was a health profession does. Be all you can be...professing health care.

### *Conclusion*

It has been my intention to help you reflect on your life in reverse. I have suggested that the wisdom of the ages is that happiness or well-being is the appropriate end or goal of life. Such happiness is attained by living the virtuous



life, a life of excellence; being a quality human being, being all you are capable of becoming in your uniqueness. I have sketched what it means to be a health professional, and attempted to demonstrate that health care can in remarkable ways fulfill our human needs as documented by Professor Maslow.

Let me conclude by tempering my call to this passionate striving for excellence. My intention is expressed well in verse by the distinguished poet-laureate of Argentina, Luis Borges in his poem "Instantes." *If I could live my life over again, the next time...I would try to make more mistakes; I wouldn't try to be perfect; I would relax more; I would be more silly than I've been; in fact, I would take few things very seriously. I would pay less attention to hygiene; I would take more risks, more trips. I would contemplate more sunsets; I would climb more mountains; I would swim in more rivers. I would go more places I have never been. I would eat more ice cream and fewer beans. I would have more real problems and fewer imaginary ones. I was one of those people that lived tranquilly and productively each minute of his life. Sure, I had moments of happiness, But, if I could turn back time I would try to have only good moments; Because, in case you didn't know, that's what life is made of...only of moments. Don't miss the present. I was one of those people who never went anywhere without a thermometer, a hot water bottle, an umbrella and a parachute. If I could live life over again, I would travel more lightly. If I could live my life over again, I would start going barefoot at the beginning of Summer, and would remain that way until the arrival of Autumn, I would take more carriage rides. I would contemplate more sunrises, and I would play with more children if I had... Once again my life ahead of me.*

In pursuing excellence, in striving to be all that you can be, please remember that life must be balanced by play; by having fun. Life is to enjoy! The sentiments of Borges, I think, are also reflected in the thinking of giants in our intellectual history, such as Frederich Nietzsche, when he said, "*live dangerously.*" Other expressions that make the same the same point are Joseph Campbell's "*follow your bliss*" or the Roman poet Horace's "*carpe diem*," or so well-expressed by Robin Williams in the "*Dead Poet's Society*" ... "*seize the day.*"

I challenge you today, as you to commence this new era of your existence, to quest for excellence. You are departing a health science center that has a remarkable tradition of excellence and is continuing its academic quest for excellence. Follow its pursuit of excellence. Live life to the fullest. My wish for

you is embedded in the ancient Chinese blessing: *May you have longevity...may you have prosperity...may you have happiness.*

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