

Charge 2009

By Dr. Charles Ouimet

At your medical school interviews four years ago, we asked you to describe your interest in medicine. And you replied that you wanted to be primary care doctors – working exclusively with geriatric patients – who live in the rural areas – found in underserved overpopulated urban centers. Huh?

Then you would say that you decided to become a doctor in response to a medical issue suffered by yourself or a loved one.

But I believe that this type of decision was made years ago by your emotional brain, which stirred the still air and quietly birthed a noble dream. Its birthday was certainly one of the most important of your life, and yet you probably do not remember it. That's OK; you probably don't remember where the spinal cord is, either.

But on that seminal day, you set in motion a series of actions that led to ... this moment in time. James Allen said: "Dream lofty dreams, and as you dream, so shall you become. Your vision is the promise of what you shall at last unveil."

Today, 73 veils have dropped.

And now you will suffer the burden of our pride. We are not proud because you are smart; being smart has always been necessary for good doctoring, but it has never been sufficient. We are not exactly proud of what you are. We are proud of who you are, the kind of persons that, through dedication, self-sacrifice and love of mankind, you have become. You forfeited the right to be ordinary.

Some years ago, an emergency room doc called to tell us about one of our remarkable students. A patient had come to the ER following a fainting spell. The exam was normal and she was about to be discharged when the student asked, "Are you sure there is nothing at all that is bothering you?" The patient said: "No, I'm pretty much fine." But in this tentative reply the student heard, "Yes, there is something, but I am afraid to tell you about it." The student gently persisted and the patient finally said, "Well, the EXIT sign looks funny. All I can see are the letters EX." Whereupon the student suspected – correctly, as it turned out – that the patient had homonymous hemianopsia following a stroke involving the left posterior cerebral artery.

The point is not that the student could recognize homonymous hemianopsia, although that was way cool. I am proud of the student because using body language, tone of voice, facial expression and a caring touch of the hand, she was able to communicate her sense of compassion and trustworthiness effectively to an anxious patient. I think that each and every one of you would do the same.

Joseph Conrad wrote a passage that seems strikingly relevant to the sensibility of the humanistic doctor, a sensibility, he says, that "speaks to our capacity for delight, for wonder, to the sense of mystery surrounding our lives, to our sense of pity, and beauty, and pain; to the latent feeling of fellowship with all creation – and to the subtle but invincible conviction of solidarity that knits together the loneliness of innumerable hearts, to the solidarity in dreams, in joy, in sorrow, in aspirations, in illusions, in hope, in fear, which binds men to each

other, which binds together all humanity – the dead to the living and the living to the unborn.”

Our own Dr. Robert Watson has written that “medicine is fundamentally a moral pursuit.” And Schopenhauer said that the basis of all morality is compassion. Marcie didn’t learn compassion in my class, goodness knows. And although it is a big part of our hidden curriculum, I suspect neither she, nor you, learned it there either. I credit each of you personally for developing as humanists, and I credit the parents who gave you this vital element of your medical education long before you came to us. And parents, the bragging rights given to you by “your son or daughter the doctor” were hard-earned and well-deserved after all those years they developed under your auspicious care.

It is said that your dreams may lose their grandeur coming true, and now as you fly from the nest (or flee from it, as the case may be) you have to deal with this. If I could steal a little from Woody Allen, you are at a crossroads. One path leads to crushing fatigue. The other to devastating exhaustion. Let us pray you have the wisdom to choose correctly.

Fatigue will always be nipping at your heels; don’t let it bite at your hearts. Schweitzer warned that “The tragedy of life is what dies inside a man while he lives.” But there is a blessing unique to those who dedicate themselves to medicine. Your work will never suffer the taint of triviality, materialism or greed. The dream you realize today, based on a love of mankind, is of noble purpose; and in dreams and in love there are no impossibilities. Paraphrasing Emerson, your dream survives if you know that even one life has breathed easier because you have lived.

Schweitzer said: “I do not know what your destiny will be, but one thing I do know: the only ones among you who will be really happy are those who will have sought and found how to serve.”

We wish you every happiness and may each of you find

joy in your work,

peace in your families,

and large dreams in your hearts.