

2009 COMMENCEMENT CEREMONY
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Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen.

What a wonderful day this is! A day that's been years of effort in the making. It's a moment of boundless pride and exultation for your families, your friends, your teachers...and for *me*.

And for *you*—if my memories of my own graduation from medical school are any indication—it's a feeling of enormous thrill...validation...and *relief!!*

I hope it's also a day of gratitude. As I'm sure you are keenly aware, no one reaches a pinnacle like this one in a vacuum... and it's important to carry with you an abiding sense of thankfulness toward the families, friends and faculty who have helped you get where you are today.

This would be a good time to stand up and give them a round of applause.

Commencement, as you all know, is not just the culmination of a major chapter in your lives. It's also a beginning. And it's the "beginning" part I'd like to focus on—today's ceremony as your induction into your future life. Specifically, I want to offer you some thoughts about the shape of your future success.

Let me say up front that for me, success is not necessarily about climbing ladders. Some of you will do that, I'm sure. Others will find meaningful success serving impoverished populations, either here at home or in far-flung parts of the world. And still others will find it in the classroom, inspiring young people to become the best physicians they can be...or in the lab, unlocking the secrets of science...or in a small rural practice, changing lives... one patient at a time.

In other words, whether or not you achieve fame and fortune is not the issue. In medicine, such things are typically accidental by-products of a very different kind of quest, anyway. But achieving success—in the deepest sense of doing something meaningful with your life—is supremely important. It matters because of what, as doctors, we *do*.

Malcolm Gladwell, the author of *Outliers* and other thought-provoking books, has an interesting theory about success. In his view, "it isn't the brightest who succeed, but rather those who have been given opportunities and who had the strength and presence of mind to seize them."

Gladwell marshals evidence from many disparate fields to support his thesis: hockey players... pianists...physicists...and a particularly intriguing cohort of 1500 child prodigies who in the early twentieth century were meticulously tracked from elementary school on. By the time they

reached a career-measuring point, there were as many couch potatoes as scholars.

This is not to say, of course, that intelligence doesn't matter. Only that it's just the starting point—of all the factors in the mix, the least decisive. Truly brilliant people seem to know that. I've found that, practically without exception, they are humble—among other things because they “get” that they didn't “earn” their IQ.

So however smart you are, the first factor in succeeding is understanding that you can't count on your brain to get you there without a lot of help from the rest of yourself...and without strong relationships with all kinds of people, each of whom—advanced degree or no—has every bit as much intrinsic value as you do.

A second factor is your relationship to failure. The fear of failing is paralyzing to many people. In fact, for some, it's so overwhelming that—consciously or not—they make sure they never have to face it. They “forget” to send in the application. They don't “find the time” to study for the test. And so on.

A few months back, *The New York Times* had an entire article about the phenomenon of self-sabotage. Ironically, it turns out it's a form of self-protection—all about being able to tell yourself that you *could have done it* if you'd really tried.

But you can never be truly successful if failure frightens you. Unless the only thing you ever do is daydream, you *will* make mistakes. We are not omniscient. I remember all my failures, and had plenty of them. And I can guarantee you I that worked hard never to make the same mistake twice!

In essence, you can't *ignore* your mistakes, because otherwise you'll never learn from them. But you must never let them *define* you, either—any more than you'd let a victory or two make you think you're perfect.

Rudyard Kipling had a wonderful way of summing this up in his famous, “*If*.” One of his key barometers of moral success, as you may remember, was whether:

“...you can meet with Triumph and Disaster
And treat those two impostors just the same.”

The third factor is what you might call “receptivity”—staying open to new possibilities.

I hope you won't mind if I borrow from my own past to make the point here. I just couldn't find a better example of “zigging and zagging.” (That's the technical term for it!)

- I originally intended to be a neurosurgeon—and wound up in radiology.
- I thought I'd go into private practice—and wound up in academic medicine.
- And for sure, even a few years ago, I never thought I'd wind up dean and CEO!

As you can see, I pre-planned everything!

Now, let me recapitulate the three-part recipe for success:

One: ability—the least crucial ingredient, though fortunately one that all of you have;

Two: the courage to face failure and learn from your mistakes;

and

Three: openness to unexpected changes in direction.

Those three elements, at least for me, give you what Gladwell calls the “strength and presence of mind” to seize opportunities.

There’s just one point we haven’t touched on yet. What about the opportunities themselves? With all the fallout from the economic crisis, just where will the opportunities come from?

Well, I think that for people who care about what really counts and who have the energy and imagination to seek new answers, you couldn’t ask for a better time to make your mark.

Beneath all of today’s trials and anxieties, our country is coming to terms with the fact that for many years, entire swaths of so-called “wealth-creation” were just imaginary. Much of our economy wasn’t about *adding* value... it was, in essence, about making it up.

When you made the decision to take on the rigors of medical school, huge numbers of gifted college graduates were opting for Wall Street. As recent events in the stock market have made abundantly clear, your choice was not just *generous*, it was also *wise*.

Whatever booms and busts and bubbles may swirl around you in the coming years, you will be anchored to an ancient, eternally noble calling. You have chosen a profession that is *real* and that *matters*.

And at the end of the day, *that*, in my eyes, is what success is all about.

Congratulations to all of you, and thank you very much.