

2019 WHITE COAT CEREMONY THE GIFTS OF BECOMING A PHYSICIAN AND SCIENTIST

Dennis S. Charney, MD, Anne and Joel Ehrenkranz Dean of the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai and President for Academic Affairs of the Mount Sinai Health System, delivered the following remarks at the 20th Annual White Coat Ceremony on September 18, 2017, in Stern Auditorium.

The White Coat Ceremony marks the beginning of the academic year and welcomes first-year students into the medical profession. As students are helped into their white coats by faculty, they are reminded of the significance of their profession and their responsibility to balance scientific knowledge with compassion.

Class of 2023, Family and Friends, Faculty, and members of the Mount Sinai Boards of Trustees, Welcome to our annual White Coat Ceremony.

Every September, I stand at this podium to welcome a new group of uniquely talented individuals to the medical profession. In preparing my remarks, I step back from the noise of the workday world to reflect on what it means to don the white coat and join the order of physicians.

Why do we have this ceremony? As you will notice, when you put on this coat and wrap the stethoscope around your neck, something changes in you. It is subtle. Did it make you smarter? No, sorry. Better looking? No, again, sorry.

The Class of 2023 is as accomplished as any in our nation. To be sure, you come to Mount Sinai from top undergraduate colleges and universities and have mean GPA and MCAT scores as high as other top medical schools. But, you are much more than these metrics. You are athletes, researchers, entrepreneurs, musicians, dancers, veterans, writers and more, as well as advocates and activists for local and global communities.

Yet ... when you don the white coat, while you will still be all those things, something will change.

What will it be?

I can tell you, that it does NOT symbolize an induction into a class of elite academics.

Rather, becoming a physician is a great privilege, it is a GIFT.

It is important that you be thankful for all the GIFTS associated with becoming a physician and scientist. It will enrich your personal life, enhance your professional sense of purpose, and, most importantly, improve the lives of patients who place their trust in you.

What are the GIFTS?

We should start with the GIFT of FAMILY. You did not get to this time and place by yourself. Please give a shout out to your family and friends, without whose support you would not be here today.

Being a member of a family is a priceless privilege, which costs nothing, but love.

Related to the GIFT of family is the GIFT of GRATITUDE. I suggest that you work on, what has been called the **Golden List**, the aspects of your life you should be thankful for. This should be an ongoing process because it can serve to keep your spirit high even during the darkest of times.

On your Golden List, should be the GIFT of FRIENDSHIP. During your education at Mount Sinai, you will make friends that will last a lifetime. I have found that old friends are the best friends. It is a wealthy person, indeed, who calculates riches not in gold, but in friends.

And there is the GIFT of GIVING and showing COMPASSION to your

patients – the best way to get more out of life for yourself, is to give part of yourself away. You will find by doing so you can accomplish more than you thought possible.

Teddy Roosevelt said, “People don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care.”

Compassion has been shown to have healing properties...It enhances patient outcomes, patient safety, and provider wellbeing...that’s you!

As asserted by the Dalai Lama, compassion can be good medicine

“A mind committed to compassion is like an overflowing reservoir - a constant source of energy, determination and kindness. This is like a seed; when cultivated, gives rise to many other good qualities, such as forgiveness, tolerance, inner strength and the confidence to overcome fear and insecurity. The compassionate mind is like an elixir; it is capable of transforming bad situations into beneficial ones.”

Another GIFT of being a physician and scientist, and this may at first glance seem counter intuitive, is the GIFT of solving LIFE’S GREATEST CHALLENGES.

As a physician, people come to you in the crisis of their lives, asking you for answers.

Being a doctor means living up to immense expectations of society.

At any hour, in any place, it is assumed if tragedy strikes there will be a doctor on hand to handle the case with grace and confidence.

Both physically and mentally, doctors are expected to stitch up the victims of adversity.

When epidemics emerge, when the unspeakable occurs, it often falls upon physicians to be first responders, to explain how, and why, even when it may be inexplicable.

Yes, being a doctor is tough. The challenges are daunting.

Yet, let me also be among the first to tell you it can be incredibly rewarding.

In fact, the very same elements that make it difficult are often what make it worthwhile.

Yes, today too few patients will be cured. Sometimes, though, you will save a person’s life. And some of you will make a discovery that will help many, if not millions of people. Granted, we all come into medicine expecting such moments to be more frequent than they are, but these moments exist. **They are not a myth.**

Yes, we are often called upon to show strength during professional and personal tragedy. This is both a burden and a privilege. **To show strength, to show courage, to inspire** those around us by demonstrating RESILIENCE under duress – this is a GIFT unlike any in the world.

Winston Churchill said, Courage is the first of human qualities because it is the quality that guarantees all the others...

Courage is built every single day with the little things you do, it is not one giant event.

And, Courage is believing in yourself and choosing to take action towards your goals and vision for your future. It is getting out of your comfort zone. It is never giving up.

Perhaps your ULTIMATE GIFT is the chance to DREAM BIG.

Class of 2023, you have the ability to achieve greatness and ease the suffering of our communities. The stakes are as high as ever. What we need is a group of dreamers to rise against the tide of history and believe it is possible to succeed where generations past have fallen short. You will have many medical facts to memorize and learn, but do not forget to let your imagination run wild, to seek solutions to the most difficult problems we face as a people.

And when your idealism is met with skepticism, remember that every GREAT DISCOVERY started off as an idea in the head of some Dreamer who stayed the course.

“20 years from now you will be more disappointed by the things that you didn’t do than by the ones you did do. So throw off the bowlines. Sail away from the safe harbor. Catch the trade winds in your sails. Explore. Dream. Discover.” – Mark Twain

Finally, I leave you with the following questions....

What will it take for you to become a leader of the next generation of physicians and scientists?

Will the times make you a leader? Or, will you, as a leader, shape the times?

RESILIENCE, CREATIVITY, AND EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE are the foundation of great leadership. Coupling these traits with the gifts of Family, Gratitude, Friendship, Generosity of Spirit, Compassion, and Courage, will enable your dreams to come true, and, THEREFORE, those of the patients you serve.

CLASS OF 2023, I know you have what it takes to become the next generation of transformative leaders.

And we, as your mentors, will be by your side.

THANK YOU.