

2013 medical student commencement speech by Jenna Emerson, M.D.

Thank you Dr Mejicano.

Actually, thank you to everyone filling this lecture hall today. One of my most important tasks in this speech is to recognize you all, on behalf of my entire class. Thank you for all of the help we've gotten along the way. Everyone in this audience has played an immensely important role in helping us to achieve this lofty goal of becoming doctors. There has been plenty of sacrifice along the way, and there is plenty more to come. Without the devoted support of our families, partners, mentors and friends this would have been a very different journey, and much less fun. So thank you. We owe you. The next time you've got an irregular bowel movement or an itchy patch of skin, you've got a favor you can call in.

When I think about what today's ceremony represents, I'm not struck by a sense of victory, or a feeling that we've reached an end. Instead, I'm terrified by how much I still don't know, and overwhelmed by the weight and responsibility inherent in this ancient title of "Physician." [to class] I'm willing to bet that you all are feeling, to some extent or another, the same way. Only experience will provide us with the practical skills which we now lack - and by all reports it's going to be a pretty rough road.

But remember, you never really felt ready for the first day of anatomy, your first presentation on the wards, or the first time you were handed needle drivers at the end of a surgery and expected to sew a straight line. Yet somehow, though this great crucible of medical education, we've emerged competent, even though half the class passed out at the sight of their own blood when we learned to start IVs.

Despite the challenges we've faced, I've been continuously amazed by the fun, humor and friendship with which we have completed this journey.

Time and again throughout these years people have asked what I think of my class, and my answer has always been the same. "My class," I tell people, "is the most amazing group of individuals I have ever had the honor of being associated with." It's absolutely true.

So I challenge you, Med13, bring the spirit of this class through with you as you move on to the next phase of training, and throughout your career. In fact, I challenge you to use the uncertainty and trepidation of this big leap into residency as an opportunity to better serve your patients. In the blur of stale coffee and graham-crackers-dipped-in-peanut butter dinners which is to come, it may become easy to lose your perspective of what this job is really all about. When being a doctor becomes routine, when it's no longer new and thrilling, take a second to remember the intimidation and uncertainty that you feel right now. Those emotions will only become more acute in the weeks to come, as we begin our internships and write our first scripts. As fear and anxiety roll over you in these next weeks, make a point to take note of how that feels.

Today we have the benefit of a celebration, fancy hats and mimosas coursing through our veins to quell the quiet terror of beginning to introduce ourselves to strangers as "doctor." But in the past few years, each of us has been present for the sharing of results or diagnoses which have forever altered another person's life. I will never forget what it felt like the first time that I "broke bad news." For a brief second I understood that this young woman's entire world had just shifted, that everything around her now

looked like earthquake aftermath. Her life would always be divided between “then” and “now,” with our conversation being the mile marker between the two.

Remember, when you diagnose new onset heart failure, deliver a baby, remove half of a colon or tell an 8 year old that she’s got diabetes, you are creating transitions in other people’s lives, moments which for them are as significant as today is for us.

Our job is a big deal. When you lose sight of that, as we invariably will from time to time, remember how you felt today, and realize that your patient may be feeling the same way. In the profoundly humanitarian spirit of this class, I think it is only appropriate that as we celebrate our accomplishments, we also recognize our uncertainties, and use them as a tool for empathy in the future.

It takes a certain kind of crazy to dive into this world of medicine, and the degrees we just received are proof that each of us is a little bit nuts. But we’re also brave, tough and smart. We’ll be fine. No, we’ll be great.

This is a huge day, a day rightfully dedicated to celebrating how far we've come and how much we've accomplished. You will remember today for the rest of your career, just like the first time you dropped your pager in the toilet, and the first time you performed a digital rectal exam. Congratulations guys.

In the words of Dr MLK Jr,

"Occasionally in life there are those moments of unutterable fulfillment which cannot be completely explained by those symbols called words. Their meanings can only be articulated by the inaudible language of the heart."

I’d like to close by borrowing a few words from Garrison Keillor, a dear friend whom I’ve actually never met. Despite being much-used, they seem to me an entirely appropriate way to bring these words to an end. Med13, Be well, do good work, and stay in touch.