

Faculty message remarks by Benjamin Hoffman, M.D.

Thank you...

Dean Richardson, distinguished faculty, undistinguished faculty, students, alumni, families, friends, Romans, countrymen, admirers, patrons, partisans, courtesans, apostles, groupies, flunkies, minions, disciples, toadies, lackies, raps callions, poseurs, sycophants, vagrants, scofflaws, hooligans, ne'er do wells, and old people who just like coming to these things. Four score and twenty years ago... it was 1926. I have no idea why that is significant, it just seems like a good way to begin a speech.

Congratulations to the class of 2013. Thank you so much for this incredible honor. It is a privilege to be here with you today to celebrate your commencement dressed up in these ridiculous outfits. Normally wearing a robe at 10 in the morning means you are either a supreme court justice, or that you have simply given up. Or both.

I have 5 minutes to impart the wisdom I have gleaned in 20 years as a physician... That would leave 4 ½ minutes of dead air. I thought about harnessing the power of interpretive dance and free form rap, but my children absolutely forbade it. Instead, I will tell you several stories.

As you sit there, ending this chapter of your brilliant career, and eager to begin the next, you are undoubtedly waiting for the epiphany, for the bolt of lightning that will come from the heavens and magically transform you into a real doctor. Good luck, I am still waiting. Let me know if it happens for you, because I've always secretly worried that maybe it was just me.

Suffice it to say that I don't think the epiphany ever really comes... Why not? It's sort of like the end of the Wizard of Oz- it was in you all the time.

I remember as a student asking the chief resident in medicine how the whole transition occurred, and he shared with me some information that made me feel a ton better as an intern, but continues to give me nightmares each year as July 1 rolls around.

He told me that at the beginning of every academic year, the chair of medicine would meet to address all the new interns on the day before they started. He gathered them all in a room, and he would tell them how great they were, how they were the best of the best, and how lucky the program was to have them.

He told that they would work hard, that they would learn much, and assured them that as the superstars and thoroughbreds of the next generation, and that they would shine as brightly as any had ever shone.

What he did not tell them, was that in the next room, the chief resident was meeting with all the other residents to remind them to watch out for the newbies, how clueless they each had been when they started, and pleading with them to watch the interns like hawks to make sure they didn't do anything stupid or hurt anybody.

Remember, as terrified as you might be, this happens every single year, and it almost always works.

My first day of pediatric residency, I was assigned to the cancer ward. This was a natural and sensible decision, as I had never even so much as seen a kid with cancer during my entire medical school career...so where else they put me? I remember sitting nervously in the resident work room, waiting for the outgoing intern to come and sign-out the service to us, so that we could begin. That handover was all that stood between him and the end of his internship, and 5 days of well-needed vacation.

All I remember is a blur of words that I had kind of heard before about kids with this kind of -oma and that type of -emia, and seemingly endless lists esoteric chemotherapy drugs.

When he finished, we could literally see the shackles of internship dissolve from his body; he stood taller, his skin went from exhausted pallor to healthy sheen, a smile formed on his lips and engulfed his entire face, and he skipped out of the room leaving me and my 2 intern teammates jaws agape and slightly nauseated.

Our supervising fellow then calmly rounded us up, and assured us it would all be ok. He would sit down with each of us and help us make sense of what Dr. Skippy McSkipperson had just signed out before frolicking out of the hospital. It was the first and only time I can actually say that I have seen a grown man frolic. That is the kind of thing that you just can't un-see.

The fellow looked at me. "Let me run the lists with these guys and then I will catch up with you. I want you to do 1 thing: Rocky is all done with her chemo, and just needs to be discharged. I looked in on her already this morning, her labs are all fine; she is totally ready to go.

All you need to do is go do a quick exam and write her discharge orders. Her nurse is awesome and she can walk you through the whole thing. " So off I trudged to do my first real doctor thing.

I easily found Rocky, and discovered that she was a super cute 2 year old girl who was sitting in a high chair by the nursing station, picking through a bowl of cheerios and fruit. I thought "Maybe I can do this." I introduced myself to the nurse, and she gave me the chart. I read through quickly, I saw that my patient suffered from retinoblastoma, an eye tumor that occurs in young children. I had actually heard of that. Just an exam and orders..., " maybe I can do this." I looked through her list of home medications... There were not that many, and I actually recognized some of them. " Maybe I can do this."

I went to examine Rocky. As soon as I took a step toward her, she looked up from her breakfast, and stared at me like I would imagine Mike Tyson stared down Evander Holyfield's right ear. My heart rate went up, and I took another step. Without any hesitation, Rocky took her hand, and put it up to her right temple, and

in one deft and practiced motion, popped out her prosthetic eyeball. She then reached down, grabbed a green grape from her tray, placed it in the empty eye socket and stared me down again.

When I regained consciousness, the nurse was gently chastising Rocky for being mean to me, and cajoled her into letting me examine her. I managed to stop my hands shaking long enough to actually write some orders, and just like that, I was a real doctor, albeit one who had just been smacked down by the cutest 2 year old in the world. Rocky spent a lot of time in the hospital that year, and we got to be good friends, even spending Christmas eve in the hospital playing hide and seek together. For those of you keeping score, She kicked my butt there as well. Rocky 2, Ben 0.

This is the part where I am supposed to tell you to wear sunscreen, to call your mother from time to time, and to always be good to each other. I think you already know these things so I am going to leave you with 3 simple things:

1. Always assume your patients would rather be someplace else. Not because it is you, I hope, but because it is always better not to be sick, and as brilliant charming, and delightful as you are, patients have a gazillion better things to do than pass time with their doctors. It is an incredible privilege to be allowed care for them, and you must insure that you never forget it, so that they always know it.
2. Always do the right thing- this may sound vague, but this is among the best advice I ever got. You will know what the right thing is, and while it is not always the easy thing, right is right, and that does not change from patient to patient, from rotation to rotation, from morning to noon, to the middle of the night, or from the ER to the OR to the ICU. Let this be your compass. The needle always points to what is right.
3. Love what you do, even on your worst day, and if it is your worst day, act like it doesn't hurt. Being a resident is never easy, being a doctor is never easy, but it is pretty damn awesome. Competence is a rare commodity in the world, and it is a hell of a lot easier to become competent at things you love. Become competent, stay competent, and love being a physician.

As I close, I want to thank you in advance for your hard work, dedication, and all the amazing things you are going to do in your career. As you take the oath of Geneva, pay close attention to the line about the health of your patient being your first consideration. You are entering not just a profession, but a true calling. Honor that calling.

The best fortune I ever got from a cookie exhorted me to fight as hard as I could for what I believe in. I challenge you to do the same, today, tomorrow and for the rest of your life. The worst fortune I ever got told me that what I had just eaten was not

chicken. Make sure you always check, because there are lots of things that taste like it.

My deepest gratitude to the class of 2013 for this chance to honor you.

Congratulations, go forth and do great things.