Well Hello Ladies and Gentlemen –

Good morning and a very good day to you.

To start with, I’d just like to say that if you in the crowd could see the facial expressions here within my class and on the faculty seated among you that there is more than a hint of anticipation and a little anxiety as I stand here before you. You see, I am not known to be the most predictable person in front of a group, especially with a microphone in front of me, especially at karaoke bars.

But my friends - you can all breathe a sweet sigh of relief right now. I promise I’ll keep this generally appropriate, and here’s why. Out in the audience, amongst this sea of wonderful friends and family and meaningful people who have traveled across the globe to be with us today, are my own two sweet grandmothers – Hi Betty, Hi Jo-Don – and if there’s one place that I like to draw the line (at least most of the time) it’s just prior to the offending of grandmothers. So brace yourselves people, off we go.

I have been charged today with speaking on behalf of an incredibly talented, varied, and unique group of individuals – the OHSU Medical Class of 2010 and those colleagues who have joined us from classes above. It’s a rather daunting task, for we are a strong-willed and fiercely independent amalgamation of potent personalities. We’re proud of this, as we should be, but we are also all very different...and how do you speak for everyone? It took me awhile, but as I sat and thought about how to encapsulate this most recent and similar chapter in our very dissimilar lives, three broad categories seemed to stand out – demanding to be addressed: The things we’ve seen, the ways we’ve changed, the people we have to thank.

The things we’ve seen:
Just for a moment, I want you to imagine a hospital – towering, labyrinthine, monolithic. Two, 10, 12 stories – it doesn’t matter. It might be a hospital that you’ve worked in, spent time in as
a patient, visited an ailing family member or friend in. Imagine it now. Now keep that image in your mind’s eye, humor me for a moment, because I want all of you to imagine that building – all of the walls and floors and elevators and hallways – as completely and totally transparent as the first glaze of winter ice. An entire building constructed from the finest crystal, without a smudge. A glass hospital.

Can you see it? Can you imagine what it would look like? Hundreds of patients lined up in their beds, floating above and below each other on 14 perfect planes of midair. You see the machines hovering around them, hissing and beeping and infusing, the colorful scrubs of the nurses in their soft-soled shoes passing between them. You see the zamboni-like vacuums, one on top of the other on top of the other, whisking the invisible carpet of the long corridors between the transparent walls and the exposed bathrooms and the fish-tank view of the surgical suites and the floating CT scanners and the hovering lines of hungry people waiting at the cafeteria.

You look a little closer, and you begin to see teams of starched clean doctors, roving in packs between the sick. And mixed in with these regal long white lab coats are some silly looking short ones – and wearing those short coats are us. Trailing behind the team, lingering over patient’s beds collecting vitals and laboratory data, sometimes hiding in the bathroom – the medical students that you see before you today.

The things that we have had the opportunity to collectively see, every day, would shock and amaze most of you. Separated only by these thin walls and floors is the entire spectrum of the human condition, distilled and consolidated in one building. To see it all at once through transparent walls would be utterly overwhelming.

- The thick, sweet, dense smell of a baby emerging to the exhausted moans of its mother. Slippery and perfectly new – eyes opening without preconception or sin to see the world for the first time.

- A tired old body with tubes going in and tubes coming out – just clinging to life with each mechanical breath.

- The desperation of a mind spiraling into madness on the inpatient Psychiatry ward. The slow clearing of consciousness and emergence of self as that madness resolves.
- Just-pregnant teenagers facing hugely complex decisions about just what the heck to do next.

- Young terrified fathers, looking so happy and so awkward in their lilac paper booty suits and bonnets. Crouching at their wives’ heads and whispering encouragement as the obstetricians cut down to their new baby.

- Surgeons with their sterile drapes, spinning into their blue dresses, huddling over deep and well-lit holes in the flesh with uncompromising perfection.

- Stitches thrown on a beating heart.

- The slippery flower of the small bowel, spreading out yellow and pink from the mesenteric root, as delicate and tender as the petals of any rose.

- The old veteran, clinging to a soft-pack of Camels as his nurse rolls his wheelchair outside to the curb. Lets him light one up and bring it to his Trach’. It’s what he has left, he says through his vibratory microphone, and who here can blame him?

- An overwhelmed single mother with a crying two-year-old and a beautiful new child. Tears welling up in her eyes at her first pediatric visit because she’s embarrassed to admit that she doesn’t feel as happy as she thinks she should, as happy as she’s letting on to others.

- A huge family, standing around with Grandpa at the sliding door of the main entrance and waiting for the car to be brought up, everybody’s arms are filled with wilting flowers and get-well balloons – everybody is smiling. He’s getting stronger every day. They’re going home.

We have collectively seen these things every day now in this hospital and others for four entire years, and it has changed us.

**Part Two: The ways we’ve changed**

During our first week of medical school, we sat in the old library auditorium on the day we received our first white coat, and listened to the faculty talk about the trying and formative years that lay ahead. We believed them when they said that we would feel ourselves changing, but I don’t think most of us understood until more recently what exactly they meant.

- Four years is a long time, but it went by so damn quickly. A lot happened.
- Some of us fell in love, and some of us drifted apart.

- We had children, lots of children, beautiful children.

- We’ve gotten a little chunky. I myself weigh twenty-three pounds more than I did walking across the stage less than four years ago. I am not any taller. I do not have any more muscle mass. And I’m comfortable telling you this because I know that I am not alone.

- We have fallen ill – in our bodies and our minds. Some of us have healed completely, and some of us still struggle every single day.

- We have fallen off rocks and cliffs, some metaphorical and some painfully concrete – as evidenced by the casts and scars and wheelchairs here among us today.

- We’ve been humbled and we’ve been inspired – had fleeting moments of competence interspersed between long periods of confusion and feelings of ineptitude. I do have to say, though, that after four years the ratio seems to be improving somewhat – and the relationship may flip the other way some day soon – at least that’s what we keep telling ourselves.

- We’ve tempered somewhat, the faculty say. We came into this thing studying on all cylinders. A genetically enhanced, naturally selected, competitively honed breed of academic superheroes. We pushed the bell curve so far to the right that it no longer resembled a bell at all. We clawed and fought over every measly question during exam reviews...so much so that some professors just stopped showing up. And now....? Well...let’s just say that rotations are seeming a little more...optional these days? Our cumulative GPA since match day has taken an Olympic swan dive. The student lounge, which used to be for sleeping and eating on call, has become a 24-hour-a-day social extravaganza. It IS Facebook in there.

- The medical universe has expanded faster than our comprehension of it can keep pace. Sometimes it seems like we felt smarter before we started this whole thing, like cocky teenagers we didn’t know all that we didn’t know.

- We’ve gotten more comfortable with really uncomfortable things – asking complete strangers about their poop and farts and private parts. About their sex lives and the details of their deepest fears. Breaking down all those barriers that a lifetime of manners and a culture that respects privacy has instilled in us.
- Some of us have lost faith. In ourselves, in our path, in the concept that we’re really doing much of any good at all. But most of us have felt that sense of empowerment and purpose return with a connection or a compliment or a meaningful thanks, sometimes just verbal pat on the back – felt it widen our eyes and flow through our vessels like a bolus of pure adrenaline whipped up with a thick shot of Portland espresso.

- We have changed my friends - in good ways and bad ways and just different ways, from fundamental shifts to imperceptible tweaks in the way that we view the world. And we have changed because of those whom we have surrounded ourselves with.

**Part Three: The People We Have to Thank**

As a class, we owe our achievement today to so many different people. Any attempt to address even the broad categories of individuals who have shepherded and inspired and supported and pulled for us over the last four years and beyond would inevitably fall short. I only hope that by thanking the few, we can adequately express the emotion that we feel for everyone who has played a role in this process.

- First - To our families and to our friends, who have selflessly shared with us this most demanding pursuit. You have endured the stresses and the commitments alongside us. You have sacrificed as we gave away so much of our time and our energy and ourselves in the hope that we may one day be able to meaningfully give back – that our choice in life will be worth what we have given up – will be worth the time away from you. This sacrifice is not over, not for you and not for us, not by a long shot – and we apologize in advance along with giving you our deepest thanks for sticking with us. We hope to make you proud.

- To the basic science professors and the researchers and the physicians and the mentors who have inspired us, and steered us, and pushed us ever forward. You have passed us the knowledge that was once given to you, that you have modified and amended with experience and time. It came to us distilled and refined and sometimes even force-fed. And most of the time we gobbled it up – stored and filed it away to be revisited and further amended as the empiric river of science flows ever onward. You have molded in us the very idea of the kind of physicians that we wish to become. We will emulate you, taking bits and pieces from each of your teachings and blend them together into something uniquely ours. And one day we will take students, and the road goes ever on.
- To the support staff who helped us through with barrages of email reminders and herded this scattered stampede of strong willed cats toward the finish line that we finally crossed today. To the nurses who took pity on us, who mercifully took us aside and showed us how practical things actually work, showed us how to start a stinkin’ IV, showed us how to swaddle a baby, showed us where to find the “silence” button on those obnoxious bedside machines. Thank you.

- And then there are the people who are typically NOT thanked in graduation speeches, but who will be in this one...even through I’m way over my allotted three to five minutes already.

- To Isa, “The Two Taco Combo Girl” at the Mac Hall Cafeteria. You piled way more guacamole and cheddar on those two soft shell beauties for $3.99 than the University Cafeteria Services worst nightmare would allow. You were like Robin Hood – taking from the man and feeding the poor, redistributing the cheesy wealth. Thank you.

- To the people that mopped the cadaver lab floor each night so that we wouldn’t be slipping and sliding the next morning in formaldehyde and greasy human juice. You were in there all alone after dark, with 50 half-dissected bodies. And since the anatomy class takes place in the fall - that means that you were in there after dark cleaning on Halloween Eve. Whoever you are, wherever you are. You are really, really brave. Thank you.

- To the standardized patients, who let us fumble and falter, and clumsily paw and poke our way through the rudimentary beginnings of our first physical examinations. “Student Dr. Kinney,” my preceptor would say, “don’t be shy, why don’t you go on in a little deeper on that prostate exam and give him a little more anterior pressure! That’s it...can you feel the sulcus???....great....rotate!.....next student please...and can we get a little more lube here.” My god man, thank you.

- To the incredibly patient patients. Who see a new batch of green medical students in tow year after year after year. To the ladies who mercifully restrain themselves from just kicking their foot out of that cold metal stirrup and landing a swift shot right here on the chin of every man among us as we say...with a nervous voice and anxious rivulets of sweat dripping down our foreheads, and hands shaking like a parkinsonian tremor... and I quote... “Just relax there ma’am. Scooch your butt down here until you feel it almost slide off the bed...that’s it....ok.....uh.....right...now just let those legs just fall way out to the side, that’s it, ok....you’re going to feel a little pressure here.” Ma’am, thank you for not kicking.
- A final aside – “Pressure” means “Pain.” “A little stick and a burn coming up” means “Brace yourself - this is going to hurt like hell.” And fancy doctor words like multifactorial, cytokines, cryptogenic, and idiopathic are all medicales for “we don’t have a freaking clue what’s going on here.” Keep your ears peeled for these, good people – especially when you hear them from us – the graduating class of 2010.

Thank you.