

Thomas Jefferson University Commencement Address

Graduates, congratulations on your chosen fields. Promoting health and helping others is the highest human calling. You have heard the call. You have acted on it, and my heart is with you.

The great educator Horace Mann once said, "Be ashamed to die until you have won some victory for humanity." And today's commencement gives you the opportunity to uphold his ideals.

Today I want to speak to you with stories, not conventional commencement platitudes. Stories that can help you achieve success for yourself and advance forward the causes you care about. They are simply stories — some painful, some uplifting, all with lessons for you. They confirm fundamental human virtues that you can nurture to achieve a future that you desire. Equally as important, I have learned with time that the power of a personal story, honestly told, builds trust. And that trust can be built at the personal and professional levels.

My first story — a true story — is about my beautiful sister-in-law Rosemary who helped me through a trying time in my childhood. In July of 1972, she went into the hospital to deliver her second child, and unfortunately, she lost her life during childbirth. The cause was a medication error. A preventable error.

For the last 37 years, I have been working to make sure what happened to Rosemary never happens to anyone ever again. Improving the healthcare delivery system became my focus. It became my passion. It became my professional "why."

That and other adverse life experiences have and continue to drive a business and personal worldview that has changed the arc of my life and has helped many others. My view is anchored in the reality that life can be hard, but successful personally and professionally.

It will take a strong sense of knowing your "why," the ability to work together, and a willingness to open yourself to others.

Graduates — share your stories, big and small. And hear the stories of those you care for. For a world of opportunity can open. The great human rights activist Maya Angelou put it more poetically, "There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you."

Last year, I was fortunate to publish a book titled: *Life's Bulldozer Moments. How Adversity Can Lead to Success in Life and Business*. Events, like the loss of my sister-in-law Rosemary, can knock you to your knees. The book proposes what you do when you get up. That's what matters.

Having lost Rosemary to a preventable medication error, I founded several successful healthcare companies to address this very issue of medication errors and other human health challenges, including better data sharing, better integration and improving healthy aging.

And today, I am proud to be the CEO of Tivity Health, a publicly traded company that helps to improve health outcomes for older people, empowering them to live their lives with dignity and vitality. We enable healthy aging.

Just last month, I joined the 103rd birthday celebration of one of our oldest members. She started our physical gym fitness program at 89. I was touched when she asked me for a dinner date. She had the wisdom to know that it's never too late to begin a new project. The good news for you today is that all of you have time to accomplish many good projects.

Across my cumulative experience, I have learned that innovation without integration was not a path to success at levels that could have prevented my sister-in-law's death.



Donato Tramuto (center) with Stephen Klasko, MD, MBA, and David Nash, MD, MBA

That brings me to the first of three imperatives for success that I'd like to share with you today.

1. Develop a collaborative IQ

This term was coined by Mike Leavitt, who served as secretary of Health and Human Services under President George W. Bush. When I met with the secretary a few years ago, he shared my concerns around the absence of innovation of new concepts with the integration of existing ideas.

A collaborative IQ leverages the strengths of the many to achieve a common goal. Someone gifted with a collaborative IQ doesn't seek to replicate the good work of others. She mixes people to create an entirely new result.

Practicing this lesson, I founded in 2008 a company that combined multiple organizations providing medical professionals with information via digital platforms.

Today, more than 3 million physicians around the globe use this system, saving thousands and thousands of lives from medical errors. Innovation without integration will not yield immediate or sustainable results.

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2. My second success driver is to practice transformational leadership.

This is not transactional leadership. A good transactional leader does many things right. A transformational leader does the right thing. A transformational leader sees beyond the immediate task to bigger, long-range issues. Senator Robert F. Kennedy was a transformational leader.

He has long been a hero of mine.

During my younger years when I was bullied, I entered the quietude of an intellectual curiosity that was fueled by the writings of Senator Kennedy. His example of perseverance and his writings of moral leadership helped fill those difficult years. I admired him for his own ability to transform his life and become one of our greatest national leaders despite great personal tragedy.

Five decades ago, doctors surveying the poorest regions of the American South found third-world conditions, including diseases long thought to have been eradicated, even among children. He awakened the nation's conscience through hearings, media and moral outrage. He stated clearly — if one wants change — they must be passionate enough to want it. Yet, he also brought hope.

He was transformative. He knew the right thing to do, and he knew why.

3. Graduates, that leads me to my last imperative: be sure to find your own personal “why”.

Nobody cares what you do — until they know *why* you do it.

Nothing brought that lesson home to me quite like the events of September 11, 2001. You see, I was scheduled to fly on United Flight 175 from Boston to Los Angeles on 9/11. Due to a toothache that brought me to my Boston dentist on September 10th, I left for LA later that day and never boarded the flight on September 11th.

Sadly, my two friends and their young son who had been visiting me in Maine did, and they lost their lives when the second plane hit the south tower. Even now, I grapple with the larger questions: Why was my life spared and not theirs? How could anyone murder a 3-year-old boy?

This bulldozer moment guided me to Tennyson who said, “We faintly trust the larger hope.” One survives. One finds new purpose. One finds new causes driven by a renewed sense of why.

In the fall of 2001, we launched the Tramuto Foundation. For 15 years, we have supported many global organizations and helped hundreds of young children with special challenges pursue their educational dreams.

But we did not stop there.

I have been haunted by the fact that in our lifetime, 1 billion people will go to their graves prematurely because they lack access to a healthcare worker. Six million are children who die each year because they are denied clean water, medication and medical attention.

To help address this, we created Health eVillages, a global non-profit that provides medical information and decision support to caregivers via mobile devices.

The results have been astounding. For example, in Lwala, a small village in Kenya, we have reduced infant mortality from 100 deaths per 1,000 births to 30. Yes! Seventy more babies per 1,000 births are now alive because of Health eVillages.

Just because you are poor does not mean you deserve to be treated differently than those whose fate has provided them with better means.

Passion – embracing your why – can and will change your corner of the world.

Two years before the great Irish playwright, George Bernard Shaw, died, he was asked by a reporter to name a famous person whom he missed the most. A poet? A teacher? Or a writer? He thought for a second and responded, “The person I miss the most is the person I could have become.”

My journey is well along. And I've concluded that power stems not from wealth, degrees or status. Rather, power is in knowing your why. Power is visualizing a world of change — not a world of rest. Power is knowing that in your hands lie the opportunities to score many victories for humanity.

Good luck and Godspeed.

This is an abridged version of Mr. Tramuto's commencement speech at Thomas Jefferson University, where he received an honorary degree.

Donato Tramuto
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Tivity Health