

Mark L. Tykocinski, MD Commencement Address to the JMC Class of 2012

May 21, 2012

Verizon Hall at the Kimmel Center for the Performing Arts

Class of 2012 – you have been trained to be Jefferson’s ambassadors to the world. As such, my parting message to you speaks to your sense of empowerment. I draw lessons from a Nobel laureate, a moon-mission astronaut, and a world-class pianist.

Message #1: DREAM BIG. Supplement the day-to-day with ambitious goals and do not underestimate your own catalytic power. Recognize your inner agency – one that transcends self-imposed limits and empowers you to influence events even on the largest of stages. The story of my own mentor, Dr. Bernard Lown, speaks in particular to how a single physician’s agency can play out in a remarkably short timeframe.

Back in the 70s, I was a clueless Yale undergrad hunting for a summer job up in Boston, wandering the hallways of Harvard’s School of Public Health, literally just looking for an open door. I stumbled into Lown’s office. What followed was a life-changing Forrest Gump-like cascade – three intense summers with one of the world’s most remarkable physician-scientists and a close-up view of how a single physician with a clear goal can move mountains.

Many believe Lown should already have received the Nobel Prize for Medicine – after all, he discovered cardioversion with pulsed DC current, the ‘Lown waveform’, and pioneered the cardiac defibrillator. Yet, while the medicine prize has eluded him thus far, what has come his way is the Nobel Peace Prize. This he shared in 1985 with a Russian cardiologist in recognition of their co-founding the International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War.

What stands out in Dr. Lown’s remarkable saga is just how quickly it all unfolded. It was a mere four years from the first International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War (IPPNW)

Congress to Lown’s standing on the podium in Stockholm with Nobel medal bestowed. A mere kernel of a thought in one physician’s mind: *why cure individual patients if we are all but a keystroke away from mass annihilation?* Any of us could have had this thought. Any of us could have acted on it. But we didn’t. Lown did. And a mere 4 years later, he flew from his secluded perch in academia to a world podium – catalyzing a world-class movement of physicians, penetrating the Iron Curtain, and deploying citizen diplomacy to influence a superpower dialogue. And what makes this so tangible is realizing how close I was to these unfolding events – just 30 feet down the hall from Lown’s office, as the embryonic seeds for his Nobel journey were being sown.

So, Class of 2012, do not limit yourselves – dream big, take the first small steps, persist in a single-minded way, and know that big things can sometimes be achieved in remarkably short timeframes, seemingly in the blink of an eye. You too can shape – and even shake – the world. ‘Be realistic’ is a message you’ve had pounded into you like a drumbeat over the years. But I’m now urging you to titrate in a bit of unrealism. Open yourselves up to greater possibilities! Certainly have realism ground you, but don’t let it cage you.

My second message to you, Class of 2012, is a bit more sobering: Sometimes you can shake the *status quo* in lightning speed, like Lown, and be there to garner the glory, but at most times, you are simply laying cornerstones and foundational bricks for edifices that others will cap off. Often, we are initiators, enablers – fated to concede the limelight to others who finalize what we introduce. Understand that this enabling role, in projects and initiatives that reach beyond us in time and place, is no less noble and remains the most worthy of ambitions.

The metaphor of ‘*the third astronaut*’ capsulizes this thought. Some of my contemporaries in

the audience may remember a song by the rock group Jethro Tull entitled, *For Michael Collins, Jeffrey and Me*. Released in 1970, one year after the first moon walk, this song was a tribute to Michael Collins, the Apollo 11 astronaut who stayed behind as command module pilot orbiting the moon and minding the mother ship Columbia as his two fellow astronauts, Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin, descended in the L.E.M., the lunar module *Eagle*, and stepped into the limelight of history – the image of their feet touching the moon’s surface beamed to billions back on planet Earth and imprinted forever on mankind’s collective psyche. All eyes were on Armstrong and Aldrin; few, if any thought about Collins – *the third forgotten astronaut* – who piloted Columbia almost a half-million miles round-trip and came close enough to almost touch the moon but never set foot on it. What a powerful metaphor for the enabler, for selflessness, for teamwork.

When interviewed later, Collins claimed that what preoccupied him the most was his concern that Aldrin and Armstrong would not make it back to the mother ship, leaving him in the unenviable position of returning to Earth alone. But the lyrics to the Jethro Tull song intimated a more complex psychology at work, projecting an ambivalent Collins:

*I’m with you L.E.M.
though it’s a shame that it had to be you.
The mother ship is just a blip
from your trip made for two.
I’m with you boys, so please employ just a little
extra care.
It’s on my mind I’m left behind
when I should have been there.
Walking with you.*

“I’m left behind when I should have been there” – a bittersweet lament, conveying the mixed emotions of a man forced to watch his two

partners moon walk into history. And yet, Collins played his role dutifully.

So, sometimes as agents we are privileged to be like Lown – driving accomplishments that unfold quickly; recognized and rewarded as prime movers. But at other times, we are enablers like Collins – not privileged to carry the baton on the final leg of the race, but rather destined to yield the finish line snapshot to others.

A former colleague once shared with me a profound Greek saying: “*Do the good deed and throw it in the sea.*”

What is the implication? That one should never expect recognition or compensation for one’s good deeds. A wise saying, but is it entirely true? Is doing the good deed a matter of selfless giving, with no personal return?

I would opine ‘no’. There are personal returns even for the enabler. In enabling, you are growing yourself. Acts of selflessness provide a framework for, and become part and parcel, of your own self-development.

One final message to you, Class of 2012, about persistence and fearlessness in the face of challenges. Embrace challenges and eagerly seek out problems to be solved. No obstacle is too daunting! As you manifest your agency, whether or not recognition will be your fate, do so with relish for the difficult. Just take the first steps because, time and again, your sheer agency and initiative will somehow make the obstacles before you melt away. Paradoxically, the challenges are often the most empowering, pointing to imaginative solutions and driving innovation.

We all have our own favorite inspirational anecdotes of someone who has tackled seemingly insurmountable obstacles, triumphing through persistence. On my personal list is the pianist Leon Fleisher, one of the true giants of the 20th century keyboard. Fleisher made his public debut at age 8, and by age 16, played with the New York Philharmonic under Pierre Monteux, who labeled him “the pianistic find of the century.” Fleisher became one of the few

child prodigies to be accepted for study with Artur Schnabel, linking him to a tradition that descended directly from Beethoven himself. And then, like the hero of a Greek tragedy, he was struck down in his prime: at 36, he suddenly and mysteriously became unable to use two fingers of his right hand.

Fleisher recalls the depression that engulfed him as his condition worsened, but even more powerfully the sheer love of music that rescued him from complete self-destruction. That love of music manifested itself in his starting to conduct, but far more compelling, in his continuing to *play* – now with his left hand only – while searching for a cure for his condition. Miraculously, at the age of 66, his condition was diagnosed as focal dystonia, and cured by experimental Botox injections. Having regained the use of his right hand, he returned to Carnegie Hall in 2003 to give his first two-handed recital in over three decades, bringing down the house.

It is not so much Fleisher’s return with two hands that makes him a legend, as it is the 30 years he pressed forward with his weaker left hand, developing new strengths in the face of new obstacles. He inspired the American composer William Bolcom to compose *Concerto for Two Pianos, Left Hand*. And then there was Paul Hindemith’s *Klaviermusik* Piano Concerto for the Left Hand, written years earlier for the Austrian pianist Paul Wittgenstein, who lost his right arm in World War I. It was Fleisher who rescued this piece from the dustbin and who premiered the work in 2004 with the Berlin Philharmonic, and a year later with the San Francisco Symphony.

Fleisher’s left-handed piano saga didn’t end there. At age 82, he underwent surgery on his right hand, requiring him to rest it for a number of weeks. This did not deter him from proceeding with a scheduled concert at Muhlenberg College, once again performing left-handed works only, and concluding with Brahms’ arrangement for the left hand of the Chaconne from Bach’s *Violin Partita No. 2 in D Minor*.

So, Class of 2012, you are more empowered than you think – whether you see the fruits of your

labors in a short period of time or you plant the seeds of success that only bloom later.

Problem-solving is our fate. It is what energizes each of us individually and collectively. As framed by David Deutsch in his recent book, *The Beginning of Infinity*, we are all together on a collective journey of endless problem solving, with no end *per se* – life and mankind are about continuous, never-ending progress, improvement, and knowledge generation.

Drawing on a quote attributed to Will Eisner, my plea to you, Class of 2012: be the ones to find the “*impossible solutions for insoluble problems.*” Like Lown, start great things, even if you only can spare time to do it as a sideline. Like Collins, be enablers, confident that, even if the limelight eludes you, you will benefit in any case, as you are on an endless journey of self-creation that is powered by your giving of yourself. And, like Fleischer, no matter what hurdle is thrown in your face, even when your strong right hand falters and ingenuity demands that you reinvent your weaker left hand, keep pressing forward with a confidence that most hurdles can be overcome.

As you now take the sacred Oath of Hippocrates, hear the profession’s ancient call to service, heed its admonitions, and affirm your commitment to others in the most professional and altruistic ways and permit yourselves to look beyond yourselves. Think big, enable even if you won’t get full credit, and know that your agency is almost limitless if you simply plow through the obstacles before you.

We salute all those that brought you to this point in life – your parents and family who nurtured and supported your passion for service and inquiry. As you cross this stage, it is indeed the dreams of all of us here today that go with you. You enter a long tradition that dates from Hippocrates, to McClellan and Gross, through Gibbon, and now to you. It is your turn to join, to continue, and to enhance Jefferson’s legacy of service, and to perpetuate that desire to make a difference that brought you to Jefferson four years ago. ■

This is an abridged version of Dean Tykocinski’s speech.