

I am very thankful for the chance to offer some thoughts as you all reach this milestone in your medical professional pilgrimage. First, I wish to acknowledge that the COVID-19 crisis has transformed the last 3 months of your medical school experience in ways unknown to any previous class. I have always taken part of the many celebrations that typically mark the approach of graduation and I feel the absence of those events deeply. While it may be small consolation, please know that I and the rest of the faculty are truly sorry for the way this has turned out and we appreciate your willingness to allow the good of the larger community to take priority over our personal or corporate plans.

But looking forward, let us remember when it all began four plus years ago. Each of you received a letter from our office that began with the words, “*CONGRATULATIONS! It is with the greatest joy and excitement that I offer you a place in the University of Florida College of Medicine class of 2020*” and will culminate with all of us gathering in the virtual world of Zoom to take the Hippocratic Oath together. My job affords me the privilege of getting to know you from the time of your application to medical school to your matriculation and then throughout your education. Through the admissions process, CABCO, Hematology, Doc-in-the-Box, reflective writing and the Physician Patient Relationship elective (not to mention Monty Python and Zombies) I am blessed to be able to interact with you all four years! So I hope you will forgive me if I trouble you one last time with some thoughts about your future as physicians and the impact of the isolation thrust upon us by the pandemic.

To be truthful, I am feeling a powerful gravitational force drawing me into an unhealthy “self” orientation. Uncertainty in the wake of the coronavirus fuels this pre-occupation with myself and bears the fruit of fear, anxiety and resentment. (My family members are faithful to point this out when they see it in me.☺) If some of you sense what I am describing, I hope we find encouragement by turning to some very wise people for insights about how to escape this “prison of the self”, live up to the high calling of our Oath and at the same time find a more fulfilling life.

I have been troubled enough about this proclivity toward self-absorption, that I began looking for anyone who had studied this phenomenon. Interestingly, I came across a study from the University of Chicago showing that isolation and loneliness produce increased selfishness and this feedback loop is self-reinforcing.¹ I suppose this is not surprising because when we are separated from our true communities, we lose touch with both the support and needs of others. Furthermore, in medicine where we are called to serve and care for others, loss of contact with patients deprives us of relationships that drew many of us to the profession and sustain us as we practice. Dr. Viktor Frankl, a holocaust survivor whose wife and parents died in Nazi concentration camps has written and spoken extensively on what I have come to call “the paradox of the self.” As an internationally renowned psychiatrist, he made the following observation,

“The more one forgets himself--by giving himself to a cause to serve or another person to love--the more human he is and the more he actualizes himself. What is called self-actualization is not an attainable aim at all, for the simple reason that the more one would strive for it, the more he would miss it. In other words, self-actualization is possible only as a side-effect of self-transcendence.”

Specifically in the medical profession, we promise in the Hippocratic Oath to do the following things for our patients; *remember them with gratitude and humility, hold sacred their trust, and do all in our power to help them to physical, mental and spiritual health.* This requires us to allow their needs to supplant our own, living with a graceful self-forgetfulness. To paraphrase Dr. Edmund Pellegrino, we promise to suppress self-interest when the welfare of those we serve requires it. To do this, we must remember that our patients are real human beings who are suffering. They have families, friends, disappointments, hopes and dreams. I challenge you to learn at least one unique thing about each patient you meet and see if this doesn't help you maintain your own humanity as well. Our own Dr. Richard

Christensen was the psychiatrist to the homeless in Jacksonville until his untimely death. He offered a beautiful and succinct summary of our profession when he said, “the practice of medicine is a moral endeavor that is grounded in a covenant of care.”

I truly believe in this high calling, yet I still find myself falling short more often than I would like to admit. In those moments, I remember my own humanity and the brokenness that comes with it. So what should we do when we fall short? Is the right response to ignore or deny our failure, or justify ourselves? I have tried all of these and please believe me when I say these paths lead nowhere fruitful. In my thirty years of oncology practice, I have learned that there is only one path to wholeness and growth; we must face and acknowledge our failure and forgive ourselves. In other words, speak the truth and offer grace while reaffirming the commitment to our patients. In addition to this however, we must also offer the same grace to all those around us, patients, nurses, colleagues, and students. In this way, we build rather than tear down the community of care.

At the apex of the civil rights struggle, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, saw the critical nature of community. “Our goal is to create a beloved community, and this will require a qualitative change in our souls as well as a quantitative change in our lives”.ⁱⁱ Each of you has been part of the UFCOM community cultivating the sense of care and service that our applicants notice. This does not happen without intention and nurturing. I have long marveled at the ease of my job as admission dean because all I have to do is bring our applicants here and let them meet you! The wise ones notice the spirit of hospitality and deference you show one another and they tell us how much they want a part of the fellowship. Thank you for making my job so easy. Wherever you go, you will always be part of the gator doc nation.

But how do you imagine your upcoming residency? Do you envision your future in medicine as serving within the community of care or toiling in the healthcare factory? Can you cultivate the community of care in your new homes? Consider the words of a resistance leader in Nazi Germany, “those who love their idea of community will destroy community, but those people who love those around them will create community.” It is simpler than we think. Love and care for those around you including patients and staff and you will bring the UFCOM spirit with you as you enter this next phase of your pilgrimage.

In closing, let me congratulate you on making it to the finish line together. Whether or not you see me, know that I am cheering for you and proud of you. I am sure you are going to be a blessing to your future patients. In that regard, I have been thinking about the virtue of generosity lately. This refers not just to finances, but to a disposition of the heart. We live in a profoundly distracted and distracting age surrounded by voices, devices and an EMR all clamoring for our attention. French philosopher Simone Weil, once observed that “**attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity.**”ⁱⁱⁱ I hope you will practice the discipline of attention to those around you, especially your patients. I pray God’s blessings to each you as you take on this new title, Doctor! Please stay in touch and feel free to send me an email or a text if you are discouraged or just need to talk.

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ⁱ <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0146167217705120>

ⁱⁱ Source: “Nonviolence: The Only Road to Freedom, May 4, 1966,” *Ebony* (October 1966): 27–34.

ⁱⁱⁱ letter to Joë Bousquet, 13 April 1942; Simone Pétrement *Simone Weil: A Life* (1976) tr. Raymond Rosenthal