

CAPITAL SYSTEMS 2008 COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS

Thank you. I feel incredibly honored to have been asked to give your commencement address. I am not nearly as nervous as I was when I stood here in 2004, giving my first invited graduation talk to the residents who graduated that year

This occasion is especially poignant for me as it represents not only the conclusion of my participation in the formal residency training of an exceptional class but it is my last official act as an active member of the faculty of UMDNJ. My official retirement date is July 1.

So what would I like to talk about today? Three things I think. First, I want to briefly discuss the impact of Positive Psychology as an expanding force in therapeutics. Then I'll attempt to relate that to the subject of gifts and entitlements, which has been an overriding theme in my life. And finally, I want to reiterate how seven laws of ecology relate them to the provision of health care.

Positive psychology, the study of human strengths and virtues, as a field of scientific inquiry, was initiated by Martin Seligman in 1998, with the aim of catalyzing a change in psychology from a preoccupation with repairing the worst things in life to building the best qualities in life. Until that time psychology had focused primarily on human problems and how to remedy them, just as medicine largely continues to do today. The goal of treatment has been to ameliorate the 'bad' (depression, anxiety, dysfunctional cognitions) and return the person to a state consistent with the absence of 'bad'.

There is an extensive literature associating positive affect as a personality trait with physical health and longevity. Positive affect refers to the regular experience of feelings like enthusiasm, determination and inspiration. One of the more interesting longitudinal studies analyzed the emotional words in the autobiographies of 180 nuns, written when they were entering the convent at age 22. Those young nuns who focused on their happy experiences in their writings went on to live on average 6.9 years longer than those whose writings demonstrated unhappiness.

Positive affect has also been associated with increased survival time in AIDS patients.

There is growing empirical evidence that increasing gratitude is associated with increased happiness and with decreased depression. In a 6-group, random-assignment, placebo-controlled Internet study, Seligman and his associates found that a simple exercise asking people to list three things that went well each day and their causes, increased happiness and decreased depressive symptoms over a six month period.

Talking about achieving happiness, that brings me to my second area of focus. Among the positive aspects of life one might list health, intelligence, talent, beauty, positive energy, love, community, and challenging work. I would submit that each is a gift. If we are fortunate enough to be the recipient of any of the above, it is not because we have earned them, but because they have been given to us as a gift. In fact, I continue to be fascinated by the notion that everything that we humans have—the resources of the planet we inhabit-- has been given to us as a gift. From earliest times people have been running around the earth saying, “I got here first, so this is mine”—and then charging other people fees – but actually that’s just a cultural convention. Food does grow on trees. Raw materials are there for the taking. Also, the talents each of us has been given,

are certainly gifts, one can even substitute the word such as when we say “He has a gift for music”.

The love and care we receive from others are gifts, as is the time and attention that we devote to the people we care for and about. Unfortunately, my view is not the dominant one. I think that most people feel entitled to have whatever they think anyone or “everyone” else has.

In relationships, when I feel entitled, anytime that I do not get exactly what I expect or feel I deserve, I am wounded. I feel rejected, unloved, devalued etc. Please do not misunderstand me. I am not promoting ill treatment here, what I am saying is that anytime I feel entitled to anything, when I get it, that does not make me particularly happy, it is just O.K. because that’s how I believe it’s supposed to be. I don’t feel particularly grateful. But when I do not get what I feel entitled to, I become unhappy and resentful. This creates all kinds of misunderstandings especially in inter-generational relationships. Suppose you call your elderly mother every night—you think of this as a gift. She in turn feels that this is the least she is entitled to, and you should be visiting much more often—better yet, you should move in and take care of her.

The trouble with feeling entitled is that it is like an addiction, when we get our fix, we don’t hurt for the moment, we might even get a brief high, but there is no lasting happiness. In my opinion, most of the worlds’ troubles have to do with entitlement whether we are talking war—the Israelis and Palestinians feeling entitled to the same territory, road rage where people feel entitled to drive the speed limit regardless of the amount of traffic, environmental degradation since we feel entitled to use and throw away

everything, or destroy habitats getting coal or oil out of the ground, and even daily hassles, since we think we are entitled to have everything go smoothly at all times.

If we can shift our consciousness and recognize that everything, even the bad stuff, is a gift that allows us to learn and grow, we will spend much more time being happy. Difficult people in our lives, to include difficult patients who feel entitled, can be seen as gifts that give us the opportunity to develop patience, kindness and empathy. And the ultimate gift is forgiveness, both of others and of ourselves, since by definition to need forgiveness implies that we have done harm. Forgiveness is a gift as is love.

The third area I want to address has to do with the laws of ecology. In 1972, Bertram Murray, a Rutgers Professor, wrote an article in the NY Times Sunday Magazine, entitled “What the Ecologist Can Teach the Economists.” I think it has increasing relevance in the 21st Century and not just for economists but also for doctors. See what you think.

There are seven laws.

1. **Everything is connected to everything else.** Scientifically with the advent of systems theory and chaos theory, we certainly know this is true. The decisions that we make individually and collectively have wide impact on ourselves and on others. Physical health is dependent on mental, social and spiritual factors. Drugs have side effects.

2. **There is no such thing as a free lunch.** When the drug companies buy, they expect you to listen to their spiel. Prescribe too many antibiotics, resistant

organisms will develop. Think MRSA. As we use up resources of the planet, and pollution grows, lunch gets more expensive. Our climate is changing. We can no longer assume that the air we breathe and the water we drink are pure.

3. Nature knows best. Human beings do not really know all that needs to be known to manage an ecosystem. Doctors do not always know why one person responds to treatment and another does not. Evidence based medicine deals with statistical probabilities—numbers needed to treat tell us how many people must be exposed to a particular medication to achieve a benefit for a smaller number. I have some problems with that. At least we should talk about it, and be a bit humbler. They say that every ten years half of what was taught in medical school changes—only we don't know which half.

4. Everything must go somewhere. The waste absorbing capacity of the natural environment is already taxed. We must learn to recycle and reuse. We cannot throw away forever. In health, when we block feelings, keeping them out of our awareness, not just failing to express them, the physical effect can be devastating. Any blockage, of energy, feelings, blood flow or even elimination—think of kidneys shutting down-- can be drastic over time.

5. Continuous growth leads to disasters. This is my favorite. More and more money and bigger and bigger practices are not necessarily good. I read about executive compensation and it really boggles my mind. Do people really need incomes

of tens of million dollars annually? Money can become an addiction like everything else. Cancer cells, those that grow without limits, ultimately kill the organism. Too much of anything—food is a good example, does not lead to happiness, just obesity.

6. Competing species can not coexist indefinitely. While economists feel that competition is beneficial, maintaining diversity and allowing for choice, in nature, one of the competing species will be ultimately be eliminated from the ecosystem. We are seeing this now in the consolidation of the media—and had best consider whether consolidating the primary care specialties might not be a better solution than having them all eliminated.

7. The law of the retarding lead. Dr. Al Tallia had to explain this one to me. What it means is that adaptive changes, creative solutions do not come from species that are dominant in their niche, but from species and individuals that are forced to be more resourceful because they exist on the fringe. So we can expect progress coming not from white males, but from women and minorities and small wonderful residency programs like yours.

So in summary, as we celebrate the transition of the graduates from formal learners to continuous learners, I hope we will remember to focus on our strengths and virtues rather than our imperfections. Being imperfect we must learn to forgive ourselves and learn from our mistakes. Bishop Tutu of South Africa once said that “Without forgiveness there is no future.”

On the positive side, we must recognize that the opportunity to serve others and practice our profession is a gift as is all of life.

I'd like to finish with my favorite Rumi poem:

RUMI

This being human is a guest house. Every morning a new arrival.

A joy, a depression, a meanness, some momentary awareness comes as an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and attend them all! Even if they're a crowd of sorrows, who violently sweep your house empty of its furniture, still, treat each guest honorably. He may be clearing you out for some new delight.

The dark thought, the shame, the malice, meet them at the door laughing, and invite them in.

Be grateful for whoever comes, because each has been sent as a guide from beyond.

Welcome difficulty. Learn the alchemy. True Human Beings know: the moment you accept what troubles you've been given, the door opens.

Welcome difficulty as a familiar comrade. Joke with torment brought by the Friend.

Sorrows are the rags of old clothes and jackets that serve to cover, and then are taken off.

That undressing, and the beautiful naked body underneath is the sweetness that comes after grief.

Congratulations to you all. Please live fully.

Thank you.