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Mayo Clinic Alix School of Medicine

Today, I am filled with joy. But I want to share a story with you about a time I felt utterly helpless. That is how I felt as I laid on the rain-soaked pavement of a German highway. The Army jeep I had been riding had come to rest nearby twisted and mangled. I was dazed trying to comprehend what had just happened to me.

I heard the muffled sounds of alarmed voices. It was a melody I recognized from my childhood; that urgent crescendo that rises when a kid breaks a leg on a ballfield or a street corner. That sound means someone is hurt badly. It meant I was hurt badly. I tried to move but could not find the place in my mind where my lower body used to live. An X-ray would soon reveal why—a shattered pelvis and a broken spine. I quietly lowered my head back to the street and accepted that my life—were I to even live—had just changed forever. I was now on a journey that would take me through the world of medicine.

That day would stretch into hundreds of days. Over the next year, I would encounter countless doctors, numerous surgeons, generations of nurses and a parade of medical students looking to learn from my case. Every physician I encountered was highly credentialed, superbly skilled and exceptionally knowledgeable. But the thing is, they were not all the same.

I credit my recovery to a special few. My most important caregivers seemed to see their roles in deeper terms. They radiated a profound caring for my well-being, beyond mere physical rehabilitation. They knew the right words to sooth me when I was anxious. They helped me grapple with losing the Army career that I loved. They pushed me when I was lost in self-pity, and they acted with grace and dignity when I was vulnerable and naked. And most crucially, they projected hope when I was too deep in despair to see the light.

Dr. Will Mayo said when establishing this famous Clinic, “We will not treat disease, we will treat the patient.” These words capture what I came to understand from my hospital bed; that *healing* and *fixing* are not the same thing.

My doctors did not repair my body like a broken clock and return it to me. They helped me see the meaning of a life that is precious and short. Emily Dickenson once wrote “that it will never come again is what makes life so sweet.” Injury and illness are cosmic reminders that life is fleeting. Those moments invite you to recognize the purpose and meaning in each day. My doctors helped me see that.

My accident is the most important thing that has ever happened to me and I have often thought about the serenity, grace and humanity of my doctors. What about them had such an impact on me? With the hindsight of 30 years, I think I now understand what distinguished my great doctors from the good ones. It was wisdom.

Wisdom

Your academic career has made you fantastically knowledgeable. You are skilled practitioners of a difficult craft and you will only get better with experience. But truth be told, the world is flush with smart and knowledgeable people. Wisdom, however, is much harder to find.

I have made my career in communications and there is a theory of human understanding captured in a pyramid. Data is at the base, then information, and then knowledge. And at the top of that pyramid is Wisdom. Yet few professionals strive for that apex. They are content to reap the rewards of being a knowledgeable expert. Our meritocratic, credential seeking society provides a clear roadmap to building a resume, to accomplishing, to achieving on the way to power, wealth and prestige. But there is little instruction on becoming wise. We are not taught how to build character or develop the virtues that allow us to hear the whispers of what the world is calling us to do.

From my experience I am firmly convinced that a truly superb physician is a Sage. And if I have one thing to urge of you, it is for you to commit to moving beyond knowledge and strive to become practitioners of wisdom with the same rigor as you brought to your academic studies. Your patients need that from you, your community needs it from you and the world needs it from you.

The bridge to wisdom is informed, of course, by a deep well of classical thought. Whether Socrates and Aristotle or Confucius and the Buddha there is no shortage of guides. Mercifully for you, my only goal today is to get you started.

The distinguishing characteristic of a wise person is someone who adheres faithfully to a set of values and principles. They have a moral compass to guide their actions, particularly when faced with ambiguity, expediency or ethical temptation. They have beliefs they do not contravene, allowing them to sleep at night even when the day's decisions proved wrong. In my professional life, I have found that a few critical virtues form the bedrock of wisdom and I think they are vital for you to realize the full potential of your profession.

Selflessness

The first is selflessness. Our society sometimes looks upon the miracles of medicine and thinks of a doctor as God. A grateful patient can feel so in debt that he voices a holy reverence for his physician. This would inflate anybody's ego, but it is a foolish paradigm and a dangerous trap to fall into. A doctor is not a demigod or master, she is a servant. And to be superb in your service you must be willing to subordinate your self-interest to the interests of another human being.

Rather than practice in a hierarchical fashion, a healer walks alongside their patient. This was powerfully illustrated to me while watching the Netflix documentary, *The Surgeon's Cut*. The

first episode features a pioneer in fetal medicine named Dr. Kypros Nicolaides. In one scene as he prepares to perform a delicate procedure to save a baby's life, he turns to the mother and asks her to hold his arm as he performs the procedure. He says he wants there to be a bond between him and the patient that they are doing this together. It is a beautiful gesture that encapsulates the majesty of medicine and the symbiosis of doctor and patient.

Selflessness is also an essential ingredient in team-based practice. As many a corny high school coach has implored, "there is no I in team!" The Mayo brothers recognized early on that teamwork is collective wisdom, arguing that "individualism in medicine cannot continue to exist." This commitment to an integrated practice, perhaps Mayo's greatest innovation, holds little room for the ego-centered team member.

Humility

The second virtue and perhaps the most critical of all is humility. No matter your excellent education or expanding years of experience you will not always be right. My parents taught me "never say never, and never say always because there is no such thing." Staying cognizant of one's weaknesses, remaining in touch with what we don't know and leaving space to consider and admit that we are wrong are the most essential skills of wise leaders. Put another way, A true professional should be confident but never certain.

There is a body of research you would be smart to become familiar with and it is captured nicely in the title of a book called *The Intelligence Trap*, by David Robson. As he explains,

"Intelligent and educated people are less likely to learn from their mistakes. . .or take advice from others. And when they do err, they are better able to build elaborate arguments to justify their reasoning, meaning that they become more and more dogmatic in their views. Worse still, they appear to have a bigger 'bias blind spot,' meaning they are less able to recognize the holes in their logic."

Given the consequences that can result from a medical error, you should learn and practice the skills to manage your own natural hubris, certitude, blind spots and rationalizations that befall highly educated people.

Humility and doubt are also the cornerstones of curiosity. Knowing that you could be wrong and recognizing there could always be a better way are the thoughts that fuel the quest for new learning. Mayo's exceptional commitment to research and education is born from its humility, its faith in the scientific method and its quest for discovery and continuous improvement.

This is not to say you shouldn't take great pride in your achievements or experience the elation of personal accomplishment. Your friends and family who are here today certainly should! The thing to remember is humility is not thinking less of yourself; it is thinking of yourself less.

Compassion

The third virtue is compassion. Compassion is distinctly different from its more frequently cited cousin empathy. Empathy is seeing the world through another person's eyes. Compassion goes beyond seeing someone else's pain, it commands that you go toward the suffering to make it better. True compassion is action. Urban dwellers often have empathy for a homeless hungry person in the street, but it is the compassionate person that stops and offers that person something to eat. As doctors, you are being called to feed the hungry and ease the suffering of those you serve.

Recently, my daughter-in-law Analía was having some medical issues and was frustrated and dispirited. She had had four primary physicians in four years. She was being told different things from different doctors and no one seemed to see her whole picture. So, she came to Mayo here in Arizona. I texted her to see if she had had her first appointment. She responded,

"Yes!! I cried. I had my initial appointment yesterday and got so emotional. It's been a long time since I felt truly cared for by a doctor."

I hope in your career your compassion translates into that kind of impact on your patients.

A Presence in the world

I have spoken about your obligations to your patients, but what about your obligation to the world? Mayo's commandment that the patient always comes first is rightly venerated, but I don't believe it is a complete statement of your responsibility as doctors. You are also part of a community, a society, a nation and a world. And that world is suffering, and you have a role to play in its healing.

The Pandemic

We are in the shadow of a global pandemic, a crisis that has exposed the hubris of our perceived invincibility as a species. Our shortcomings in this crisis have not been ones of science, or poor patient care. It has been weaknesses in public health, where we need to act collectively as a community to protect each other and to combat a disease that has no political ideology as it burns through the population. The challenges of misinformation, the reflexive politicizing of simple, proven health measures, and unsubstantiated fears of the vaccine are problems of human behavior and they will be the challenges of your generation in this crisis and the next.

The pandemic also has revealed how globally inseparable we are as a species. As much as we might want to shield our eyes behind the curtain of our own sanctuary, we cannot ignore the catastrophe taking place in India as we sit in re-opened bars drinking and cheering that "happy

days are here again.” Our self-interest and survivability depend on us caring for others, but our moral obligations to end suffering demand it.

As doctors on the frontlines of this and future pandemic battles, you will need the kind of courage we have seen from your colleagues. They stood up for science and facts in a world awash with conspiracy and misinformation. They weathered and absorbed the public ridicule that sometimes accompanied their advice. Doctors proved to be more than experts offering counsel, they stood as examples of truth, courage, humility and compassion. They have been role models in a manner that our children can emulate.

Race

As medical professionals you believe in the sanctity and the worthiness of every life. Believing this as we do, it was shocking last summer to watch George Floyd murdered. What was so arresting was the casual disregard for the worth of a fellow human’s life, which for too long was the central justification for slavery and segregation.

In the wake of those tragic events, we have opened our eyes and committed with new resolve to root-out systemic racism. The key insight for me is the emphasis on the system, not on racial animus. Many of our institutions, our educational systems, societal practices, and our financial and economic fabric were woven in an era when a black person was considered property, biologically inferior, and inherently less deserving. As society became more racially tolerant, we lost track of why we do what we do. We fail to see the ways in which standard practices can have devastating impacts on minorities. Healthcare as much as any system deserves reinvigorated scrutiny.

Racial disparities in healthcare are shocking. Whether it be diabetes, cancer death, cardiovascular disease, death in childbirth, access to health insurance, food insecurity, or treatment for pain, racial disparities are large, persistent and pervasive. Even now Black, Latino and Native Americans have higher rates of COVID-19 cases, hospitalizations and death rates than whites.

You can’t tolerate this in your new profession. Be ashamed of it and be a warrior committed to reversing the inequities that literally cause preventable sickness, harm, pain and death for your black and brown fellow citizens.

The world will serve up many more challenges, from climate change to the great benefits and great dangers of artificial intelligence and gene editing. As men and women who don the white coat, your wisdom will be required to help us all navigate through these challenges.

Let me complete the circle of my remarks with a coda to my personal story. A few years ago, I was in a bar having drinks with a friend. A young man tapped me on the shoulder and asked if I was Michael Powell. I said yes and he introduced himself as the son of the chief surgeon who put me back together 30 years before. I was elated and told him that his Dad changed my life forever. He smiled and said, "he has talked about you many times. I think it is fair to say you changed his life forever too."

Such is the joyful reward of a medical career well-lived, where your patients change you as much as you change them. I, for one, cannot wait to hear what stories your children will tell.

Thank you.