Commencement Address

Delivered to

The Ohio State University

by

Anthony S. Fauci, M.D.

Director

National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases

National Institutes of Health

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Thank you, Dr. Drake, for that kind introduction. Members of the faculty; distinguished guests; family members and friends of the graduates, particularly the mothers in the audience – Happy Mother’s Day; and you, the 2016 graduating Class of THE Ohio State University. It is a personal pleasure and a true honor to be your commencement speaker. As I was putting my thoughts together in preparation for addressing you today, I could not help but reflect back to my own graduation from college for some hints as to what I would say that might be memorable…some quote that you might recall years from now. Well, I found that this was a fool’s errand, because I must confess that I cannot remember a word of what my college commencement speaker said or even who he or she was. And so, 30 or more years from now although you will certainly remember many of your college experiences, particularly the friends you have made, you almost certainly will not remember then what I tell you here today, no matter what I say. However, your memory will not have to stretch that far to remember what I said or that it was I who said it since you will almost certainly experience or at least consider what I am about to tell you almost immediately after leaving this stadium today.

And so, it is in this context that I will briefly share with you some personal
reflections on issues that have been important to me over the many years since
my graduation as these issues will almost certainly apply to you to a greater or
lesser degree. I had to confront them soon after graduation from college and
they are still very relevant to me up to this day. I have 5 issues that I want to
discuss with you, and I promise that I will do all of this in 11 minutes.

First. The paradox of graduation and the concept of the perpetual student.
Since this is your graduation, it is natural for you to feel that on this day you are
no longer really a student. Let me tell you that this is just an illusion. In my own
case, almost immediately upon graduation from college and certainly upon
graduation from medical school, I learned that my student days had actually just
begun. In whatever field or career path you chose, if you are to be true to
yourselves and live up to your full potential, you will live your lives as perpetual
students. The scope of what you have learned here at Ohio State and
importantly what you will need to learn after you leave here is like a giant
mosaic and this mosaic of your knowledge and experiences is eternally
unfinished, as it should be. Now there are 2 sides to this concept. The good news
is that it will be very difficult to get bored and the level of self-fulfillment can be
very high. The sobering news is that you will likely develop a sense of low-
grade uneasiness and a subliminal feeling of unfinished business, as if we all do not have enough of that anyway as we prepare to enter a new and exciting phase of our lives. This feeling, however, is not necessarily a negative, since it can be transformed into something productive and positive. You will realize that you will never know as much as you want to or need to know, and you will find that you are participating in a dynamic process with a steep learning curve. This was particularly true for me as a young physician and scientist since the consequences of getting something wrong and not being aware of something that you should have known can be serious. However, this is true to a greater or lesser degree in any career path that you chose. It is this feeling that can serve as the catalyst to constantly improve yourself. And, this will be counterbalanced by the palpable excitement of continual learning. After all these years, I still derive energy and motivation from that very subtle tension, and I still marvel at how much fun the learning process is.

**Expect the Unexpected.** This is one of the truisms that can make life quite exciting. You must be prepared at any moment to enter uncharted territory, to expect the unexpected, even in fields that seem well established. And importantly, where possible, seize opportunities. Let me give you a personal
example of the kinds of dramatic evolutions and changes that can occur totally beyond your control and that can profoundly impact the direction of your career and your life. In 1968, I finished my medical training in Internal Medicine at the New York Hospital-Cornell Medical Center. That very same year noted public health scholars and even the Surgeon General were opining and even testifying before the United States Congress that with the advent of antibiotics, vaccines, and public health measures "The war against infectious diseases had been won" and we should focus our efforts on other areas of research and public health. As fate would have it, at that time I was on my way to begin, of all things, a Fellowship for training in Infectious Diseases at the National Institutes of Health. I remember reflecting as I drove from New York City to the NIH in Bethesda, MD, as the words of the wise pundits resonated in my mind, I felt somewhat ambivalent about my career choice, to say the least. Was I entering into a disappearing subspecialty? I sort of felt like I was going to Miami to become a ski instructor. Fortunately for my career, but unfortunately and sadly for the world, even Surgeon Generals are not always correct. Indeed, 13 years later in 1981, the AIDS epidemic had emerged and transformed my professional career, if not my entire life. Furthermore, 35 years following the recognition of the AIDS epidemic, we find that infectious diseases outbreaks did not stop with
HIV/AIDS, for my field of infectious diseases has witnessed the continual threat of emerging and re-emerging pathogens including dengue in South America and the Caribbean over the past few years and the strange sounding disease called Chikungunya in Puerto Rico and the Caribbean since 2013. If that was not enough, then came the Ebola outbreak in West Africa, which consumed much of my time and energy in 2014 and 2015. And now over the past several months I have been occupied with the onslaught of Zika virus in the Americas; a relatively mild disease, yet with potentially devastating consequences in pregnant women. Zika is the first ever mosquito-borne virus that results in congenital abnormalities in infected pregnant women and one that is also sexually transmitted. You could not have made that up if you were producing a science fiction movie.

Now, obviously, not every opportunity or challenge with which you will be presented or that will influence your careers and your lives will be as dramatic or as draconian as a frightening infectious diseases outbreak. However, please believe me that the same type of unpredictable elements that I experienced in my life and in the evolution of my career in medicine and public health are going to confront you regardless of what directions your careers and your lives
take. And so, expect the unexpected and seize the opportunity if and when you can.

**Public service and social responsibility.** I believe sincerely that regardless of our career paths, we cannot look the other way from pressing societal issues. There are still pockets of society here in our own country that are steeped in poverty, drug abuse, violence, health disparities, inadequate education, discrimination, and despair. Furthermore, in 2016 we live in a global society and we cannot turn our backs on the terrible and oftimes preventable societal burdens in developing nations: rampant disease, infant mortality, abject poverty in certain regions, starvation, gender inequality, violence against women, and the reappearing specter of genocide. Some of you may devote your future careers and lives to directly addressing these societal issues. Most of you will not. In this regard, public service does not necessarily mean a profession or avocation devoted entirely to public service. One can incorporate public service into your lives regardless of your career choice. Please take this into serious consideration and make it part of your lives.
**Leadership.** You are graduating from an extraordinary institution. The young men and women of Ohio State University are the future leaders of our society, and indeed we need you for you are the hope of our Nation and the world. Leadership is a gradual process that you have already begun when you enrolled here at Ohio State. I speak not necessarily of officially designated leadership, for leadership takes many forms, including the quiet and subtle leadership of example.

Do not believe for a moment that you are too young to begin to assume leadership roles. There is a quote that is attributed to the famous Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw, whose career spanned the late 19th and early 20th centuries. I never liked the quote as a young man myself and I like it even less now that I am no longer a young man. The quote is “Ah, the pity that youth is wasted on the young,” implying that young people have boundless energy, great vigor, and a bright future, but because they are so young, they do not appreciate what this means or take proper advantage of it. Well, ladies and gentlemen, prove Mr. Shaw wrong. Take advantage of that youth and start doing your thing right now for yourselves and for society. You do not need to wait. You are ready for the world and the world certainly is ready for and needs you.
Finally, the Joy of Life. I have been speaking to you over the past few minutes about opportunity, accomplishment and responsibility, all of which have a somewhat serious air about them. I want to close with a reminder about the joyousness of life. Allow yourselves to cultivate this as much as you do your professional accomplishments. Different pursuits and activities provide joy in different ways to different people as you might expect. Find your source of joy and embrace it. Many of you will be in serious and important positions starting relatively soon. This is not incompatible with the fact that you have so many other things to live for and to be happy about. Reach for them and keep the sounds of your laughter alive.

Congratulations to you, to your families, and to your loved ones. Good luck and God bless you.