Medical Student Speech by
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In thinking about what I wanted to say today, I looked back at these four years of medical school and realized how far we’ve come. It’s especially funny to remember how utterly incompetent I felt at the beginning of third year, as we began our clinical training in earnest. I have a few funny stories to share about that awkward transition in our medical education.

I will never forget one of my first patient encounters during the first rotation of third year. I was doing family medicine in Maine, and was sent in to see a woman whose chief complaint was shortness of breath. I looked at her chart, and read the note from her office visit just one week before. She’d had shortness of breath at that time as well, and the doctor diagnosed her with asthma, and gave her an albuterol inhaler. I talked to her, and tried to figure out why her asthma had been so poorly controlled throughout the week. Did she have allergies that triggered her asthma, and were those getting worse? Did she have 4 cats that were all sleeping on her bed? Did she have a cold?

I concluded my interview feeling pretty unsure of the diagnosis, and definitely didn’t have a confident plan to help this woman’s breathing. I guess we could try treating her allergies, and maybe she does have a viral illness that will resolve on its own…

I followed the attending back into the room, and listened as he conducted his own interview. He began asking pointed questions:

“Are you having trouble sleeping while lying flat?”
“Are you more out of breath walking up a flight of stairs than you were before?”
“Is there any swelling in your legs?”

My heart sank as she answered each question in the affirmative. All the evidence pointed to a diagnosis of congestive heart failure, and she needed to be admitted to the hospital for treatment. I was MORTIFIED as we walked out of the exam room, thinking about my plan to just give her some Claritin and tell her to come back in a week. Oh no, Toby, it’s not asthma, but rather congestive heart failure.

Another story involves a classmate doing her first rotation of third year in pediatrics. She was examining a very sick child in the hospital, and noticed that his eyes didn’t seem to be tracking very well. She made a mental note that something didn’t seem quite right. As she and the attending left the room and walked down the hall, the attending asked, “Did you catch the cortical blindness?” Suddenly it made perfect sense that the child did not track well… He was, in fact, blind.

After a few interactions like that, one can feel totally and completely insignificant. For me, that feeling of insignificance lasted through much of third year. I was often part of a busy team taking care of too many patients, and felt like I never really had that much to offer. I usually found myself tagging along with a team of residents who seemed overworked, and often just too tired to really make time for teaching. You leave the hospital on some days, and just wonder what you are doing with your life.

Some days were particularly bad, and I occasionally had what could be called an existential crisis. If I didn’t feel important on my own team, how could I possibly be
important as a member of the health care system? And in this big country, on this huge planet, in this enormous universe, does anything really matter anyway? I mean, it is estimated that the universe is 20 billion light years in diameter. So if you were traveling at the speed of light, it would take 20 BILLION years to go from end of the universe to the other. So who am I anyway, and how can I matter? But I digress…

Where was I? Oh yeah, I was leaving the hospital after a bad day and feeling insignificant. The feeling of insignificance is made even more apparent because we constantly discuss the importance of significance, and we define significance in terms of numbers. In this culture of “evidence-based medicine,” so much emphasis is placed on making clinical decisions that have proven “statistical significance.” One is careful to prescribe a therapy only when it has been shown to work in a randomized, clinical trial of adequate size. We focus on p values and 95% confidence intervals, and make most medical decisions based on how significant the results of a study are.

While it all seems a bit arbitrary, I understand the need to make sense of the massive amounts of information. It is important to be able to justify the decisions we make, and to help people understand the likely scenarios given their particular set of circumstances. So I believe in evidence-based medicine, and I think that it’s the best method we have now for imposing logic on the rapidly growing body of knowledge in medicine.

But sometimes I wonder if we get too caught up in the statistics, and too concerned about doing something only if it’s been shown in some study to be the best thing. And can we even apply the results of that study to the patient who is in the room with me at this moment? Does it really matter if I give this medicine or that medicine?

And back to my existential crisis, does anything really matter in this enormous universe that’s 20 billion light years in diameter?

This brings me to the theme of my class day address. I believe that even the smallest things have real significance, and that it’s all about how you choose to look at it. We can choose to feel insignificant, or we can choose to realize our own importance, value, and worth. In his book *Man’s Search for Meaning*, Viktor Frankl writes about his experience surviving the concentration camps in Germany during World War II. It is an unbelievable story, and his perseverant attitude is remarkable. In describing his methods for coping, he says, “The last of the human freedoms is to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s way.” I believe that we largely do have the power to change our attitude in almost any situation.

Instead of being overwhelmed by the immensity of the universe, I think we should exercise our freedom, and choose to believe that we do matter, and that our daily interactions are incredibly significant.

Imagine being placed randomly in the cosmos, but traveling light years through the infinite sea of space, and coming upon the planet Earth. You can see several massive continents floating on the liquid ocean that covers most of the surface. Zooming in even
further, one can begin to see cities and towns on each of these continents. If you look really closely, in many of these cities and towns you can actually find Dartmouth medical students working tirelessly to provide care to people in need. We send students all over the world – Nicaragua, Guatemala, Tanzania, Kosovo and New Zealand, just to name a few.

Focusing in even further, one finds North America, and the United States. If someone were looking today, June 11, 2005, at a specific latitude of 43 degrees north, and a longitude of 72 degrees west, he or she would see a few hundred people gathered on a courtyard in Hanover, NH. From a cosmic perspective, we are minuscule. But I know that we matter. Every word spoken, every nod, every wink, every smile and every touch—all are significant. As we prepare to begin the next stage of our careers, I want to leave you with this message: even the smallest things can be incredibly meaningful. YOU matter, every one of your patients matters, and a kind smile or gesture can make a world of difference. Please don’t forget the power of kindness, thoughtfulness and positive thinking, and the important impact they can have on your patients. Even the small things can be profoundly meaningful. Also don’t forget that someone who has shortness of breath may be in heart failure, and that a kid who can’t follow your finger may be blind.

I want to take a quick minute to thank my parents especially for helping me understand the power of positive thinking. They used to have to suffer through my gymnastics meets when I was young, and they joke about hoping that I would have at least one good routine, so that we had something to talk about on the drive home. No matter how I have ever performed, they have always been wonderfully supportive and loving, and I can’t thank them enough. Mom and Dad – I think this may be my 15 minutes, so thank you, and I love you both. I think we should all take a second to thank our family members, friends and loved ones who have been so supportive in our journey through med school.

Best of luck to the DMS class of 2005!