



An ER Doctor Speaks at a High School Graduation

Last week, I delivered the Baccalaureate address at my alma mater North Central High School in Indianapolis. This is what I said to the graduates.

In kindergarten, I got a prize in the science fair for painting Play-Doh black. I wedged plastic dinosaurs and saber-tooth tigers in it to make it look like the La Brea tar pits. I think it was in 4th grade when I won a ribbon in the Allisonville grade school pancake supper poster contest.

And those two pinnacle moments pretty much sum up the entirety of my academic accolades in Washington Township schools, including all the way through high school.

I got an F in high school chemistry, and an F in algebra and a bunch of C's, a couple D's and if it weren't for gym and kings court singers, I doubt I would have gotten any A's. Any kings court singers here? I was the jester in the madrigal dinner. I did a few other things. I was in junior spec, *Reviewing the Situation*, 1981 baby. I played trumpet in band — actually I was second to the last trumpet — which means I played exactly two notes in every song. *Blaaamp blaaamp*.

Nobody ever saw my name on some academic kudos report sent out by the school, and no parent ever uttered the words: "Louis Profeta made honor roll, why can't you?"

And if I had to apply to college today at Indiana University, I would not get in.

You see, I thought I was going to be this star athlete and compete in college, so I really had not planned for much else. But then I got hurt in a fall, actually broke my neck, spent weeks in the hospital and all those "dreams" were over ... poof. It's amazing how quick a door can close in your life; it's also incredibly magical

how quick they can open if **YOU** are open to the possibilities that arise from failure and the word “no.” I know this more now being an ER doc. It’s amazing how strong and fragile we as human beings are, often at the exact same moments in time. So I laid in the hospital, looked around at all the doctors and the nurses and thought: “Hmmm, this stuff is kinda cool. They make good money; I think I’ll do this.” Honest to god, I picked IU for college because they beat Purdue in a basketball game on TV. Dad goes,

“Where you wanna go to college?”

I’m like, I don’t care, whoever wins this game, I’ll go there. Thank God Purdue lost ... and continues to lose.

So years later, after college and medical school and residency, I found my way back practicing emergency medicine in the very same community and township I left and a remarkable thing happened. I started seeing old classmates and their families as patients and they would all say the same thing.

“You’re a doctor? I thought you were stupid. Can I see some ID, a diploma, something like that?”

It’s understandable because even at Allisonville grade school, I had to go to early classes for kids with learning disabilities and, in fact, I was the last kid in my class to be allowed to write with a ballpoint pen. If you saw my writing you’d understand why.

“Dr. Profeta, pharmacy’s on line three they can’t tell if the prescription you wrote is for Keflex or Viagra.” Those words *have* been uttered. My k’s look like v’s, my x’s like a’s.

I did pay attention in class on occasion. I had this one teacher — a science teacher, Mr. Sutton — in 7th grade. I pretty much hung around troublemakers, people like me. And Sutton pulls me aside one day and said,

“Listen, you’re smart, you do know that don’t you? Why would you let other kids drag you down with them?”

Yeah, I got a D in that class, too, I think. But that simple sentence dug in like a Carolina tick and stuck there. “Why let others drag you down with them?” The opposite of that is just as true.

Why not let good, honorable, happy, successful and focused people into your life because they will lift you up with them? Which is what I did in college and continue to do. Make it a lifetime habit as familiar as brushing your teeth. Surround yourself with people who elevate you. You know that phrase you hear ad nauseam on TV when someone’s kid commits a crime,

“He’s a good kid, just got caught up running around with the wrong crowd?”

Well, it’s garbage. Nobody runs in the wrong crowd. You **BECOME** the wrong crowd by your choices, your acts, and by who you **CHOOSE** to associate with. You make those choices and nobody else. They start now, only they are amplified once you are an adult. Don’t **BECOME** the wrong crowd. As an emergency doc, I’ve told countless mothers and fathers the news and tragic consequences from those choices. Smart choices begin today; don’t be afraid to downsize your “circle of friends” should that circle be composed of a disproportionate number of members of “the wrong crowd.” You have but one future.

The fact that I was asked to speak here is humbling and truly an honor. But it’s also just an echo of lifelines tossed to me by others and the common sense to grab hold of opportunity when it arises and, more importantly, to develop the focus and drive to show up and do the work. As someone who now teaches hundreds of doctoral students of medicine every year, I’ll tell you something: Give me drive and determination over aptitude any day. **ALL** of you can find drive. **Aptitude** is simply what results from hard work and practice.

So Principal Branigan wants me to give you pointers, some words of inspiration. I guess he forgot about all those irate parents calling and complaining about my kid scalping tickets to junior spec. How about just some simple, good, old-fashioned advice from someone who has taken care of more than 60,000 fellow Hoosiers and has borne witness to good decisions and bad decisions, good life habits and bad life habits and has himself made some really dumb choices in life?

All this...this pomp and circumstance is just a dress rehearsal for things to come, which starts with a commitment to a lifetime of education that should not be limited to just the books assigned or the lectures in the classroom. To paraphrase Mark Twain, don't let school get in the way of an education. Seek out knowledge. Seek it out. Drown yourself in knowledge of people and places and things as simple as what is the advantage of a toggle bolt to hang a towel holder to what will Brexit mean on the emerging European markets. Learn Bernoulli's equation of laminar flow and what distinguishes a V6 engine from an inline six. Learn how to poach an egg even if you hate eggs, or how to write a haiku because all knowledge is good. All knowledge opens doors. Ignorance is what closes them. Make yourself valuable through knowledge; make yourself indispensable.

If you know everything there is about an overhead cam engine, think about how valuable you'll be if you know how to service a lithium ion battery in an electric motor, too. If you know everything about cutting hair, think about how valuable you will be if you know how to balance the books for a hair salon, too. Learn one more thing. Every day that should be your mantra: Learn one more thing.

Commit important quotes or poems or speeches or Bible verses that speak to you to memory that they might guide you through life. Go back to them, read them over and over. For me, it was Martin Luther King's speech on the mall, the Gettysburg Address by Abraham Lincoln, the Ten Commandments, the poem the "New Colossus" by Emma Lazarus that graces the base of the Statue of Liberty, the preamble to the constitution, Robert Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" and "The Napping House" by Audrey Wood.

The messages contained within those works for me are steeped in the understanding of human dignity and the ultimate sacrifices given by those for our country. They brought to light for me the freedoms I take for granted and the opportunities I have been given. They celebrate the beacon of welcoming light and hope this country represents to the rest of the world and have helped me to recognize that America is not the soil beneath my feet it is **we the people**. Civil disobedience is far more impactful when exercised at the ballot box than by smashing a storefront window or blocking traffic or the entrance to a classroom. I've come to realize I have responsibilities as a citizen of this nation and the world that I need to embrace and that I have miles to go before I sleep, my friends, miles to go before I sleep.

"The Napping House"? Because if you are blessed one day, you will need to read to a child...even when your eyes are too tired or too cloudy to see the print.

I implore you young scholars, young leaders of tomorrow. Do not shout down the people you disagree with. You do both them and yourself a disservice. Listen and debate, argue respectfully but let people have their say. Know that the opinions you have today often change as your views of the world change. What seems just and righteous to you through the eyes of an 18-year-old morph with wisdom and life experiences. Know this truth and embrace the process of growth and know that, while you think you understand what love is, you have no idea its depth until you hold in your arms your own child. So recognize that most of you do not yet truly know the love your parents have for you, so respect them by making life choices that keep you safe and me from having to tell them horrible news.

I ask of you, in your journey to give people a break, give your fellow human the benefit of the doubt, the patience of Job. Don't be so quick to judge another's behavior as rude, disrespectful, racist, sexist or intolerant. Not every bit of attitude or inattentiveness directed towards you is about you. You simply are not that important

to the stranger on the street. And many people simply do not have the insight that you might demand of them. They have their own lives. Spend a day in our ER: I'll show you real problems. You'll see what I'm talking about. Don't be so quick to assume the professor, the waiter, the clerk or the driver has a bias against you. Instead, entertain the prospect that perhaps their own worlds are falling apart with a sick child, a failing marriage, a terminal illness, financial struggles, an addicted sibling, or just a lack of awareness and that they are simply too preoccupied with their own lives to worry about your frailties. Instead, offer to all a smile, a thank you and a shoulder to lean on. Compliment often, even when you don't mean it. Buy the person in line behind you their coffee, leave a few coins in the playground sandbox; you'll make a child's day. Do this and, in time, your life will be filled with a greater degree of love and understanding. Do this for all of us who have suffered through a sick child and a trying time where we perhaps were lost in our own thoughts.

Know how to balance a checkbook and what the interest rates on a credit card mean; understand the concept of a credit rating and how it will impact your life. Learn about mortgages now, the pros and cons of owning versus leasing a car and the beauty of saving for retirement and what a 401(k) means to you. If you save \$2,000 a year at a 9% return, that is worth a million dollars in 40 years. Know there is far more joy in being able to write a check for something like a luxury car or a watch than actually owning it. I drive a basic model pickup truck, it's paid for. When I go outside, if the sun is overhead...it's noon. Learn this and embrace it and you will grow to live a comfortable life. Each day you do not, however, puts you at risk of a lifetime of poverty. The search for that simple, vital knowledge started yesterday. I hate to tell you, but you're already a day late.

Live a life of diversity, and when I talk about diversity, I'm talking about diversity of thought and diversity of perspective.

Surround yourself and embrace people who do not pray like you, who do not look like you, who do not love like you and especially who do not vote like you. You don't have to agree with them or emulate them, but respect their views because, by doing this, you will realize that we as a people have far more in common when it comes to the important things in our lives than the things that divide us. You will make great friends, and trust me, the discussions at your parties and your barbecues will be much more lively instead of the same old echos. Give it a try. Don't let mainstream and social media pundits or some celebrity tell you how you are supposed to think. Don't be pigeon-holed into a certain identity that **they** ascribe to you by the way you look or the way you love or the way you pray or the way you vote. You are much more than some assigned demographic.

The world is yours, my friends. Make it your own, nurture it, grow it, clean it, feed it, preserve it for your children. Strive for a lifetime of fulfillment, peace and understanding. Fill your days with smiles and hugs and sing songs of togetherness, because we all breathe the same air, we all walk the same soil and we all want the same thing out of life, which is to simply be happy.

And, finally, learn strength. You alone are in control of your own destiny. That is the **freedom** the founding families spoke about when they said we are endowed by our creator with the inalienable rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. It's inside each of you. That God given strength to pursue happiness. Chase it with the power, the fury and the determination of a thousand horses, with the searing heat of a million suns. Carpe diem as they say, my friends, carpe diem. Seize the day, seize this day and all days forward.

God bless you, class of 2018. God bless you in this journey.

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